

## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

### **A Dialogue with Nature Sacrificial Offerings in Candomblé Religion**

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**A Dialogue with Nature:**  
**a Study of Human-Environment Relations and**  
**Sacrificial Offerings in Candomblé Religion**

**by Giovanna Capponi**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the**  
**degree of PhD in Social Anthropology**

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## Abstract

The present work explores the relationships Candomblé followers interweave with the environment and with animals through ritual offerings and sacrificial practices. As a self-defined “religion of nature”, Afro-Brazilian Candomblé can be described as the cult of the *orixás*, deities whose origins can be traced to West Africa and who are connected with the natural elements in the landscape. The complex use of food items, other elements and animals in the rituals makes it necessary to investigate the role of these elements in Candomblé cosmology and to take into account emic perceptions of human-environment relations. Ritual practices develop around culturally determined ways of relating and perceiving the environment but they are also subjected to modifications and innovations. By presenting detailed ethnographic accounts of Candomblé rituals in Brazil but also in Italy (where a Candomblé house has been active for two decades), this thesis demonstrates how the ritual structure can be understood as a pattern that follows variations based on the needs of humans, but also on the tastes of the invisible entities and the agency of animals. The renegotiation of these elements takes the form of a dialogic process between the different parts. Ritual offerings and sacrifices can be understood not only as a form of feeding and exchanging favours with the *orixás* but also as a form of communication between the visible and the invisible world. Moreover, the constant correspondences and deferrals between humans, animals and *orixás* in the chants, in the mythology and the ritual proceedings allow the possibility of understanding animal sacrifice as being performed not only for the benefit, but also as a substitute, of a human life. Lastly, this thesis shows how ritual change is also expressed by the incorporation of contemporary notions of environmental ethics and pollution, allowing for new understandings of natural landscapes as a social and historical construct.



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## Introduction

The present work was conceived as part of an AHRC funded research project — *Cultural and Scientific Perceptions of Human-Chicken Interaction* — which began in 2014, which saw the participation of six universities in the UK. The project aimed at building an interdisciplinary perspective on human-chicken interaction based on collaboration between archaeologists, geneticists, other bio-scientists and anthropologists, and taking into account different geographical and historical settings. My own research section concerned the role of chickens in a religious and ritual context, for I chose Afro-Brazilian Candomblé. In fact, I developed this project from introductory research which I carried out for my BA dissertation in Anthropological Sciences at the University of Bologna. My dissertation concerned the ecological and social adaptations of a Candomblé house (also termed *terreiro*) founded in Arborio (Vercelli), in the Piedmont region of Northern Italy. This dissertation contained some original observations which I decided to develop further in order to understand the interactions Candomblé practitioners intertwine with the environment and other species. This was especially intriguing since Candomblé was often described by my interlocutors as a “religion of nature”, and I thus was interested in exploring how a particular idea of “nature” is constructed in different environmental settings.

Since the beginning of my research project, my goal has been to understand the different kinds of interspecies interactions involved in Candomblé practices, with a specific focus on sacrificial rituals and on the relevance of

chickens in Candomblé cosmology. Only part of my fieldwork has been carried out in Brazil (particularly in the area of São Paulo), where I spent a total of five months of research, while I considered the Italian Candomblé house to be the main research site. The Ilê Axé Alaketu Aira was founded at the end of the 1990s by an Italian *pai de santo* (Candomblé priest) who, after his initiation into Candomblé in São Paulo, Brazil, decided to open a new Candomblé house in Italy. The worship house is attended by both Brazilian immigrants and Italian converts who identify with the religious system. This diasporic community regards Brazilian houses (at least those in the same “lineage”, in which the Italian *pai de santo* was initiated) as its role model. However, it also creatively adapts to a different social and ecological environment.

I started my fieldwork with the intention of following the network of my first interlocutors, the members of the Candomblé house of Arborio, and to trace its history and its ties with some Brazilian Candomblé houses in São Paulo. Once in Brazil, my personal network expanded and allowed me to explore and have contacts with other, unrelated, Candomblé and Umbanda *terreiros* in the urban and metropolitan area. Therefore, my fieldwork did not take the form of a proper comparative analysis between two groups, rather it was shaped in terms of a more general enquiry into how different religious communities perceive and relate to animals and to the environment through Candomblé rituals. However, the Italian case study stands out as an interesting example of how extremely codified cultural practices such as rituals are adapted and re-shaped in different socio-ecological conditions. For the purpose of my research, throughout the thesis I alternate

ethnographic sections and observations collected both in Brazil and in Italy. Moreover, because of the complexity of the topic and the different settings taken into account, I decided not to employ one single theoretical framework, but to engage with a wider range of academic and intellectual perspectives. This allowed me to better explain social and cultural practices that are often multi-layered and that can be explored and understood from different angles. This was also a necessary strategy to capture the complex and sometimes contradictory ideas that emerge from my interlocutors and to explore the emotional aspect of ritual action.

In the first chapter, I take into account some of the most important notions that emerge from specific anthropological literature together with some observations from my fieldwork. This is necessary in order to start introducing, (and make sense of), the complex world of Candomblé ritual and cosmology and its relation to different types of ecological landscapes and animal species. I start by explaining emic notions of urban and natural space and how these notions fit into the spatial organization of Candomblé houses. I also trace the origins of Afro-Brazilian religions, (especially of Candomblé *Ketu*) to West-Africa, stressing in particular the cult of the *orişás*, deities popular in Yorubaland and connected to natural elements. The orixás (in the Portuguese spelling) are worshipped through sacred objects that have been indicated as “fetishes” by pioneer authors in the study of Afro-Brazilian religions. With the help of contemporary literature, I re-think the role of these objects as places of encounter between different natural and

supernatural realms, but also between different types of living and inert materials.

My second chapter aims at explaining the role of humans, deities, and animals in Candomblé cosmological views. With the help of myths found in specialist literature or accounts reported by my interlocutors, I provide a picture of how the visible and the invisible worlds relate to one another. Moreover, in this chapter I begin to introduce in detail the particular characteristics of the *orixás* and other invisible entities that populate the Afro-Brazilian world, but here I also include the different animals employed in rituals and their distinctive roles both in mythology and in religious practice. My theoretical approach compels me to consider invisible beings, animals and humans as social actors with equal value and agency, as this allows me to explain the particular regimes of equivalence and interaction that my interlocutors draw between deities and humans.

In my third chapter I introduce my interlocutors both in Italy and in Brazil, and I give an account of my methodological position during my fieldwork. I start by explaining how the Italian Candomblé house was founded and how it is related to the Candomblé houses I visited in São Paulo and Bahia. I also present the other social actors that represented my expanded network. Candomblé communities are organised according to a strict hierarchical structure based on rituals of initiation and rites of passage. Indeed, in most cases non-initiated people have a limited access to ritual knowledge, often regarded as secret, and are not permitted to take part in specific ritual



activities. However, the position of outsiders and/or researchers can often be renegotiated according to different factors that I explain in detail throughout the chapter. In my specific case, my pursuit as a researcher interwove with a slow and gradual approximation to the Candomblé world. This immersion eventually led me to renegotiate my position as an outsider and to become personally involved as a Candomblé initiate. By describing these events and comparing them with similar ethnographic cases, I analyse the ways in which the anthropologists' bodily and emotional experience can be used as a research tool.

The last two chapters represent my core ethnographic sections. In chapter four I am firstly presenting the state of art of the studies on ritual and sacrifice, and I explain how rituals are subjected to modifications and innovations. Indeed, the detailed use of leaves, animal and non-animal "blood", food items and other materials that compose the ritual offerings cannot be understood as part of a fixed set of actions, but as a general pattern that follows innumerable variations. These variations in ritual are based not only on the availability of the necessary ingredients or other external conditions, but also on the tastes and particularities of the orixás who receive the offerings, on the person who undergoes the ritual or on the agency and behaviour of the sacrificial animals. I explain through detailed ethnographic accounts how ritual practices can be considered a dialogic process between the different parts. Finally, I offer my own interpretation of animal sacrifice as a possible substitute for human sacrifice, taking into

account both recent anthropological literature on the topic and my own fieldwork material.

The last chapter aims at explaining how commodities, ingredients, materials and animals employed in the rituals are produced and acquired by Candomblé practitioners and how they are discarded after the rituals have been performed. Candomblé rituals involve a wide range of specific objects that are produced and distributed through several industries and economic enterprises such as markets, shops and small businesses. I describe the economic dynamics and the strategies Candomblé practitioners use to sustain the cost of the rituals and the ways certain items are replaced and adapted when the rituals are carried out in different geographical and ecological settings such as the Italian *terreiro*. I then analyse the social tensions and conflicts that emerge when ritual offerings are taken out of the worship houses and are deposited in the natural environment. Through the help of ethnographic accounts, I explain how Candomblecists incorporate current environmentalist discourses and adapt their religious practices to the contemporary notions of pollution and dirt. These dynamics generate new ways of perceiving and defining the natural landscape as a cultural and historical construct.

## 1. Perceptions of environment and space in Afro-Brazilian

### Candomblé

*Fieldwork notes:*

*15/12/2015 - Ilê Axé Odé Tola (Ipiranga), São Paulo.*

*Pai Odé: There, at the entrance, there are three entities, there are three trees, nobody has to know, but they are three entities [...] if you climb down the stairs there are three entities, in that green patch. Because they are entities, orixás [deities] of nature, of open air, they cannot stay indoors. These factors need to be taken into account, someone who wants to open a [Candomblé] house, someone who wants to do it, to build a house, he has to pay attention to the resources that space can provide, because otherwise he will not even come close to the orixá. And there are many people who have a Candomblé house and everything, where there is not even a patch of land, I do not know how do they survive. [...] Where there are no plants, where it is not possible to put a potplant. I do not know, I cannot say that there is more or less orixá there, but I can guarantee that for the orixá is much more difficult. Because if the orixá is nature and needs the resources of nature, which is everything [you need] to start and to finish the ritual, if you do not have them...<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> [when not stated otherwise, all translations from Portuguese are by the author] Pai Odé: Ali na frente no portão tem tres entidades, são tres arvores, ninguém é para saber, mas são tres entidades, [...] desce na escada ali tem tres entidades naquele pedacinho de verde. Porque são entidades são orixás de natureza, de ar livre, não podem ficar dentro de casa. Estes fatores têm que ser observadas, quem vai abrir uma casa, quem vai fazer, estruturar uma casa, ele tem que prestar atenção nos recursos que aquele espaço vai fornecer aí, porque se não ele não consegue nem chegar perto do que é o ponto do orixá. E tem muita gente que tem casa todinho de completo, onde não tem um pedaco de terra, eu não sei como consegue sobreviver. [...] Onde não tem um vaso, não tem como colocar um vaso. Não sei, não posso dizer que tem mais orixá ou tem menos orixá, mas eu posso garantir que a dificuldade para ter orixá é bem maior. Porque se o orixá é natureza e precisa do recurso da natureza, que é tudo para começar e para finalizar o ritual, se você não tem...

## 1.1 The House and the Forest

Afro-Brazilian Candomblé involves complex and elaborate rituals, multiple deities, entities and energies that take time to be understood in their context. I would like to start taking into account how Candomblé religious practices spread and developed within Brazilian geographical landscapes and national borders. It is my intention here to analyse the relationship Candomblé practitioners weave with the environment, the natural resources and the socio-political structure and architecture. In order to do this I will describe the structure of the *terreiro*, the Afro-Brazilian sacred space, and its implications for what is considered the ‘natural’ and the ‘urban’. By doing so, I will locate my case study in the current debate concerning the role and the perception of these dichotomies.

Candomblé cannot be depicted as a general and homogeneous phenomenon. In fact, as argued by Capone (2010, 256), sometimes researchers seek to describe the orthodox (or “traditional”) form of Candomblé, working against the insiders’ constant attempts to renegotiate their identities and practices. From this point of view, Candomblé could be located under the more general umbrella-term of “Afro-Brazilian religions”, that include Umbanda, *Xangô do Recife*, *batuque*, *tambor-de-mina* and other regional denominations (Silva 2005). Indeed, the term “religion” is contested both in social sciences and in the actual Afro-Brazilian context. As noted by the pioneer works of Africanists such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, it is not easy to give a clear and universal definition of what a religion is. In fact, many indigenous languages (Sindima 2009, 25;

Hinnells 2005, 2) do not even have a specific word for “religion”. In other cultural contexts, “religion” can appear to be almost synonymous with other notions such as “law” — in the case of *torah*, for instance — or may include very different idea as in the case of the “dreamtime” amongst some indigenous Australian groups (Sharpe, 2005, p. 22). As observed by Appiah (1998), in many traditional African societies, the ritual aspects of life were not separate from everyday life actions. This is especially true for West African cultural systems, beliefs and cosmologies that can be only be fully understood by taking into account material production, social structure and environmental conditions (Forde 1970, or. ed 1954: x). In the same way, Yoruba ritual practices were an integral part of people’s social life and relationships, not merely a secondary aspect. On the contrary, as Afolabi Ojo (1966a, 158) states: “for some aspects of Yoruba life to be fully explained and understood, they must be interpreted mainly in terms of religion”.

However, when the conjunction of ritual practices — previously embedded in a particular social structure — redeveloped in the colonial setting of the diaspora and syncretised with Catholic beliefs, it also gained the Western category of “religion”, losing the ethnic connotations and becoming universally accessible. With a wave of re-africanisation of Brazilian Candomblé in the 1980s, most Catholic elements (like the syncretism of the African deities with the saints) have been eradicated, but this last quality, the identification with the category of “religion”, has been retained (Melo 2008, 165). Indeed, most Candomblé practitioners would define their practice as

“*religião*”, and most Brazilian scholars working in the field would define them as “Afro-religious people”<sup>2</sup>.

I will concentrate on Candomblé *Ketu*<sup>3</sup>, the *nação* (literally “nation”) the most widespread among the Afro-descendant religious system, and I will not analyse in detail the rituals concerning Candomblé *Angola* and Candomblé *Jeje*.<sup>4</sup> However, I will include some elements from data I collected amongst followers of Candomblé *Angola* and Umbanda, as the different ritual practices that define the different ramifications often stand on blurred lines. As it will be shown, rituals, perceptions and beliefs are easily borrowed, adapted, and assimilated from one context to the other and they are frequently negotiated by the people involved.

It is important to note that the *fundamentos* (literally “foundations”, ritual and often secret prescriptions) vary within the same *nação*, but often depending very much on the location and the individuals. However, we can start underlining some shared communal traits in order to present Candomblé as a system of complex practices and beliefs. It is also important to note that in the history of West African kingdoms, borders and customs have often been fluid. Through the intricate inter-connections of socio-political events, wars, and conquests, different ethnic groups sharing a

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<sup>2</sup> This terminology, however, has been recently challenged by Candomblé authorities and activists. For a deeper analysis, see Capponi and Araújo 2016.

<sup>3</sup> *Ketu* is the name of one of the city-states of Yorubaland, and it became a synonym for the whole ethnic group. Another name that refers to Yoruba ethnicity is *nagô*, which was a deprecatory word used by the Ewe-Fon to describe their enemies, the Yoruba people (Lima 2003, 23).

<sup>4</sup> For a wider analysis see Capone (2010) and Parés (2006).

communal geographical landscape already shared some of their cultural practices.

Candomblé *Ketu* is a religious system that originated in Brazil, but it took its cue from the West African cult of the *orixás*<sup>5</sup>, deities who were worshipped in the Yoruba kingdoms. These were not only gods and goddesses who resided in a particular natural element (hills, rivers, etc. ) or who had the power to cure people of illnesses, but also time-tutelary deities of the city-states in Yorubaland, mythical heroes and kings who had been inserted in the pantheon. Offerings, sacrifices and chanting were performed as part of a wider way of being-in-the-world, and “religious” practices were embedded in social relations, kinship and hierarchy within the city-state or the context of belonging. As Karin Barber explains (1981), devotees in Yorubaland develop a very specific relationship with one or more deities, depending on the ties his/her family has with the god, on their hereditary profession in the compound or on personal identification. Dedicated shrines were kept in the household for the whole family to attend and take care of them.

One of the most evident consequences of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was precisely the dismembering of familiar and ritual ties, and different studies address the way in which this traumatic event affected the populations living on the African coast of the Atlantic Ocean. Candomblé

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<sup>5</sup> Pronounced *orishá* (English phonetic), it is a Yoruba word written *òrìṣà* in its original diction. Since my interlocutors are mostly Brazilian and Italian practitioners, I decided to apply the Portuguese spelling to the Yoruba words that will be encountered throughout the text, like *orixá*, *axé* (pronounced *ashé*) and *xiré* (pronounced *shiré*).

has been shaped as a way of restoring the *egbé*, the Yoruba liturgical community, within the limits of its new diasporic geography in Brazil. The reconfiguration of ritual and social bonds took place in the *terreiros*, “sacred spaces” that condensed for the first time the cults of different orixás, which were kept separated in the African architectural and urban structure. Roger Bastide, in his work *Le Candomblé de Bahia* (2000, or. ed. 1958) defines the *terreiro* as a “little Africa”, a place that fulfills the need for a new social and familiar environment. Key to this definition is the word *ilé*, which means “house” in Yoruba, but also “city” when used before a proper noun, as in the case of *Ilé-Ifé* (City of Ifé) or *Ilé-Oyo* (City of Oyo). Similarly, the term *agbo-ilé* describes a conjunction of houses inhabited by people of the same lineage (Yakemi Ribeiro, 1996, 41). Therefore, *ilé* is the best word to convey the sense of a familiar environment and a communal origin. In Brazil, the *terreiro* is often referred as *ilé axé*, literally meaning “house of energy”, or sometimes just *axé*, to highlight the strong link between the physical space and its sacrality. Interestingly, the people who belong to that particular community would identify as sons and daughters of the house (*filhos da casa*), would be part of a *família de santo* (sacred family) and would consider themselves to be kin amongst each others (*irmãos de santo*). Moreover, the spiritual leader of the community is regarded as a *pai de santo* or *mãe de santo* (literally “sacred father” and “sacred mother”).

These terms have been often translated as “of the saint”, just like *filho de santo* (describing an initiated person) is usually translated as “son/daughter of the saint” and a *pai de santo* is literally “father of the saint” (cfr. Saraiva



2010 and Halloy 2012, amongst many others). However, I would like to break this well-established tradition in the anglophone literature about the Candomblé religion and attempt a different translation. In fact, the word *santo* does not only refer to the orixás (and their syncretic counterparts, the Catholic saints) but to a whole world of *sacred* and *sanctified* artefacts, places and bodies. One's "sacred family", in fact, overlaps with one's biological family. Amongst candomblecists, it is common always to specify when they are talking about their biological kin (i.e. *meu irmão carnal* — "my biological brother") or their kin within the religious group (*meu irmão de santo* — "my sacred brother"), indicating the person who has been initiated in the same worship house and within the same religious lineage.

Normally the only people living within the perimeter of the *ilé* are the "sacred father / mother" with his/her partner and/or biological family (be its members part of the religious community or not). Their residence is often located in a separate building or floor, to mark the division between the sacred and the profane space.

"Sacred sons/daughters" would gather together in the *terreiro* only when rituals need to be performed (every Candomblé house has an internal calendar of activities). At the end of their ritual duties, devotees would return to their profane homes and lives. However, in some cases Candomblé houses, especially those with more prestige and resources, host in a temporary or permanent way, devotees in need and often children who are formally or informally adopted by the "sacred father-mother". Therefore the *ilé* sometimes restores a form of solidary community where biological kin and *sacred kin* overlap and share resources beyond the ritual activities.

Muniz Sodré (1988) analyses Candomblé and its sacred space as a relational issue. Taking as an example the colony as the context in which Candomblé has been developed, the city is nothing more than the cultural expression of a community that relates to the environment and to other contingent communities of humans and non-humans. The territory is where social action is produced, exchanged, and legitimised.

Architecture and urban features have been used as tools to build the colony and to recreate similar aesthetic and spatial organisations to European cities. In a similar vein, the first Candomblé *terreiro*, the Casa Branca do Engenho Velho, situated in Salvador (Bahia) and founded during the XIX century, tried to restore Yoruba cosmology and hierarchical structure. In this context, according to Sodré, the building of a new spatial organisation was a way of escaping the subaltern condition that the slaves maintained in the colonial society. Therefore the struggle to rebuild one's ritual and familiar life might be understood as a tool for empowerment and resistance. The African territory becomes an idealised and mythical model to be imitated, but never fully reached.

Many anthropologists and researchers dedicated part of their work to describe and analyse the spatial organisation of Candomblé communities. The typical location of the *terreiros* was the *roça*, indicating a deforested space, but more generally suggesting a house just outside the urban area, in the country or in the periphery. Nowadays, *roça* is a colloquial term to describe the worship house itself. Juana Elbein dos Santos (2002, or. ed 1972, 33-34) finds an exemplar model of the typical *terreiro* in one of the

founding, and most important, worship houses in Salvador, the *Asè Òpó Afònjá*. She divides it into two parts: 1) the urban space, including the salon where the public festivals are performed (*barracão*), the rooms or small shacks where the shrines of the orixás are kept (*peji*), the kitchen and other facilities; 2) and the wild space (*mato*, literally meaning “forest”), a garden that includes trees and water springs, but also the plants used in the rituals. This supposedly wild space, according to dos Santos, stands as a condensed restoration of the African forest.

In this microcosmos, the political and ritual elements of the African *urbs* and the natural elements seem to be part of a process of re-territorialisation of the slaves’ society in the new environment. Sodré (ibid.) points out how the division between the ‘natural’ space and the urban space recreates the basic structure of Yoruba royal palaces, called *afin*. The *afin* was not only the residence of the *obá*, the king, but also the location where many temples and shrines of different orixás were kept. Moreover, almost all Yoruba palaces were surrounded by a large portion of virgin forest. The Nigerian historian and geographer G. J. Afolabi Ojo gives a detailed account of the structure of the *afin*, the royal residence of the Yoruba *Oba* (king). An *afin* was a magnificent and walled palace, situated at the centre of every city-state, in an elevated position. All the residences of the compounds’ chiefs were built in order to face directly towards the royal palace, which was not only a symbol of political and religious power, but also the location of all the social and economic activities carried out in town.

Its spatial and architectural structure not only reflected the hierarchical organisation of the population, but had a truly central function in everyday life. Using Afolabi Ojo's words:

It [the *afin*] is to Yoruba towns what central cathedrals and churches, market-places, craftsmen's homes and shops were to medieval English towns (1966b, 34).

The typical features of Yoruba *afins* include an extensive market-place situated at the entrance of the palace, a huge courtyard where people could gather in assemblies, the building itself, and a background which often covered huge portions of territory<sup>6</sup>. The forest element was sometimes partially cultivated by the servants and the citizens. However, in most cases it was kept wild in order to constitute a hunting reserve for the king, or for local doctors to grow medicinal plants in secrecy (ibid. 36). Certainly the dense African forest cannot be reproduced quantitatively in the back garden of a *terreiro*. However, Candomblé priests cultivate in these gardens - or re-territorialised forests - the plants they need for some rituals to be performed. As shown in other classic ethnographies, the tension between the village and the forest is often expressed in a cosmological way. Forests are considered to host spirits or dangerous creatures, and hunters must take ritual precautions in order to overcome possible threats (cfr. Douglas 1970). However, these tensions do not imply the non-urban space to be completely uncontrolled. The absence of intense farming is often replaced with different sorts of horticultural practices. These are subtle ways of creating the

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<sup>6</sup> The most prominent case is the palace of Owo, in Eastern Yorubaland, whose forest background covered 99 acres out of a total area of 108 acres (Ojo 1966b, 27).

conditions for the forest to grow and provide certain fruits instead of others. As shown by many researchers in ethnobotany, indigenous people who sustain themselves through hunting and gathering alter their environment and make possible it for their favourite plant species to flourish and become prevalent in the specific area they inhabit (Voeks 1997, 19). These small-scale practices of forest manipulation shed a different light on what is to be considered a domestic or a wild environment and on the ways humans perceive their presence in the world. This same concept has been explored by William Balée in his definition of “historical ecology” as a discipline that: “focuses on the interpenetration of culture and the environment, rather than on the adaptations *of* humans to the environment” (1998, 14). In this way the author highlights the fact that the relationship between nature and culture is dialogical rather than dichotomical, and that the ecological landscape is the result of human activity rather than a determinant factor for the development of human cultural practices.

The so-called “relic theory” which assimilates forests and sacred groves to primeval examples of an untouched and preserved landscape has been also dismissed by several interdisciplinary studies, that argue in favour of the anthropogenic origin of ‘wilderness’ (Sheridan 2008, 9-18). As argued by Descola in his account on the Achuar of upper Amazon, it is not the garden that replicates the qualities of a forest, but the forest to be considered a huge garden in the first place. Somehow, the *espaço mato* (wilderness) of Candomblé *terreiros* (and of the Yoruba *afins*) could be described along the lines of what Descola calls the “homely wilderness” (1994, 220); a continuum in the presence-absence of humans within the environment.

However, the sacred space aims to reproduce a “qualitative Africa” (Sodré 1998, 55), not only in its geographical elements, but also in its cosmological representations. In fact, the terreiro works as a point of contact between the *orun* (the Invisible, the Heaven, where the gods and spiritual beings live) and the *aiyé* (the Visible, the Earth, where human beings live). According to a Yoruba myth, these two domains were once united, and shaped like the two halves of a calabash gourd. After the break of a ritual prohibition, *orun* and *aiyé* split, confining humans and gods to different realms. Candomblé rituals seem to have the aim of reconnecting these two worlds.



A Candomblé garden (Ilê Axé Alaketu Odé Tolá, Jquitiba, São Paulo). ©Giovanna Capponi

## **1.2 Natural and supernatural connections: plants, humans, animals and gods**

In the last section I analysed the spatial features of a typical Candomblé house, the way these traits developed and their possible historical origins. Here I would like to introduce the different - human and non-human, visible

and invisible, alive and inert - social actors that inhabit the *terreiro* and shape its ritual and ecological environment.

As I mentioned earlier, the Candomblé house is often called, in its Yoruba denomination, *ilé axé*, which I translate as “house of energy”. Candomblé rituals develop mostly around the notion of *axé*, which can be described as “sacred energy” or “life force”. The concept of *axé* can be described as something that is subjected to the laws of physics. It can be absorbed, gained, spent, manipulated, passed from one body to another through contact, through certain materials or objects and it can be used for a variety of purposes. Anthropological literature provides examples of similar notions such as *mana* (cf. Codrington 1891 and Mauss 2002, or. ed. 1924), or *wakan*, a supernatural force that is immanent in natural elements and objects “as simply as hardness is present in the stone or greenness in the grass” (Benedict 1938, 634). In addition, Mauss associates an idea of power and strength with *mana*. However, the notion of *axé* is much more connected to actions than to static characteristics.

Pai Mauro: In nature, *axé* exists as the specific energy of things. For example, a fish owns the *axé* - the particular energy - of being able to determine its own direction, independently from unfavourable currents. The barn owl has the *axé* of seeing where nobody else would be able to. Similarly, the wind has the *axé* of changing direction, of

passing through any chink and to have, potentially, infinite strength and intensity [...] and so on.<sup>7</sup>

This particular type of life energy needs to be literally “fed” (“alimentado”), constantly charged and renewed in order to work, just as plants need to be watered and taken care of in order to give fruit. The *axé* can be passed in the form of words, physical contact, food offerings, blood sacrifices, drumming and so on. As with electricity or fluids, this energy can be channeled, transformed and manipulated. Also, human beings can be charged with it and they can acquire the specific type of *axé* they need.

For example, the words of one’s “sacred father/mother” are regarded as being filled with *axé*, as it is contained in his/her saliva. Food offerings, when ready and waiting to be handed to the deities, are covered with a piece of cloth to avoid people looking at them and contaminating them with the *axé* contained in their sight. Sacrificial chickens must be plucked with bare hands because the energy must flow through physical contact. Similarly, when the orixás possess the bodies of their devotees, they transmit their *axé* through hugging those who are present and making sounds with their voices.

This dynamic life force, which has been so far described as impersonal,

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<sup>7</sup> Pai Mauro: In natura l’*axé* esiste in quanto energia specifica delle cose. Ad esempio, il pesce possiede l’*axé*, ovvero l’energia particolare, di poter determinare la sua direzione indipendentemente dalle correnti avverse. La civetta o il gufo possiedono l’*axé* di poter vedere dove nessun altro sarebbe in grado di farlo. Allo stesso modo il vento ha l’*axé* di poter cambiare direzione, infiltrarsi in ogni spiraglio ed avere una forza ed intensità potenzialmente infinite, [...] e via dicendo.



ceases to be so when it refers to a specific orixá. In fact, orixás are deities who represent archetypical anthropomorphic characters connected to natural elements (like fire, storms, rivers or oceans) and human temperaments. According to the contemporary Candomblé religious system, every human being is “protected” by a specific orixá who represents his/her characteristics, inclinations, behaviours and talents. One’s “personal god” can be detected through cowrie shell divination, called *jogo de búzios*, and people are integrated into the cult according to a specific ritual depending on their orixá. Moreover, almost everything - natural elements, animals, colours but also human attitudes and conditions - belong to (or are an emanation of) a specific deity. For example, Yemanjá is the goddess of the oceans, but also of motherhood, since her name in Yoruba means literally “the mother (*Yá*) whose sons (*omó*) are fish (*ejá*)”. Xangô, the hot-tempered god of justice, rules in the stone quarries and his dedicated animal is the turtle. When someone asked why, the pai de santo answered “Do you know any other animal that looks like a rock in that way?<sup>8</sup>”. Candomblé followers or sympathisers would soon develop a peculiar relationship with the landscape<sup>9</sup>, while learning to pair all the animals, plants and natural events to specific deities. Those who are intimately familiar with Candomblé cosmology would usually greet the orixás when they encounter their distinctive animals or elements. It is not uncommon, when the wind starts blowing, to yell ‘*Eppahey, Oyá!*’ as a salutation for Oyá Iansã, the goddess

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<sup>8</sup> “Você conhece um animal que parece mais pedra?”

<sup>9</sup> In this context, I use the word landscape referring to the result of human activity and perceptions in the ecological and natural space, onto which humans project cultural and cosmological meanings (Crumley and Marquardt 1990, 75).

of the winds and storms. Similarly, if a rainbow appears in the sky or if a snake is seen crawling in the street, people would greet Oxumaré, the snake-god of transformation that connects the earth to the sky, saying ‘*Arroboboi!*’.

An interesting case of identification between plants, natural elements, humans and deities is represented by the account of a woman who recalls how she escaped from his violent husband and stayed hidden in the wood for a week, fearing for her life. One day - as she thought that her husband had left - she tried to go back home, but when she approached the edge of the village she felt something was pushing her away.

Dona Marisa: I arrived there and there was an *aroeira* tree, then the fields and at the end of that there was my house. But I felt something, it was very windy, I was there close to the *aroeira* tree, I felt the wind and I felt like two hands pushing me back on my chest. So I said: “I am not going”. Afterwards, I heard that my husband was still there, waiting for me to kill me.

Carlos: (speaking to me in a low voice): You see... *aroeira*, wind... she is a daughter of Yansá.<sup>10</sup>

After hearing the story, Carlos - Dona Marisa’s son - identifies the elements in the landscape that make him suppose that his mother’s miraculous escape

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<sup>10</sup> Dona Marisa: Cheguei lá e tinha um pé de aroeira, depois o campo e lá no fundo estava minha casa. Mas eu senti alguma coisa, tinha muito vento, eu estava lá parada perto do pé de aroeira, senti o vento e como se umas mãos me empurrassem atrás no meu peito assim. Então eu falei ‘não vou’. Depois que fui saber que meu marido estava lá me esperando para me matar.

Carlos: (falando para mim em voz baixa): Tá vendo... *aroeira*, vento... ela é de Yansá.

is a sign of the protection of Yansá, the goddess of the wind, whose votive plant is the *aroeira* tree. Carlos, who is a Candomblé devotee, re-interpreted his mother's account with his ability of "reading" the landscape in a culturally determined way.

The *terreiro* is the appropriate place where the *axé* is accumulated and administered and for this reason it must contain elements symbolising every possible type of energy. Under these premises, Candomblé temples not only condense and integrate the mythical cosmology and the geographical universe of the Yoruba social structure, but are also an extraordinary repository of biodiversity. However, with "biodiversity" I am not simply referring to a physical bio-ecological environment. Rather I refer to something much wider that is the result of the interaction between different natural and supernatural species, energies, ingredients, materials and artefacts that are needed in order to perform the rituals correctly.

Vogel et al. (1993) in *A galinha d'angola: iniciação e identidade na cultura afro-brasileira* ("The Guinea fowl: initiation and identity in the Afro-Brazilian culture") mention this kind of diversity not within the borders of the sacred space, but in the place where these items are acquired: the marketplace. In fact, as it used to happen in Salvador, a novice who is preparing for his/her initiation must go to the market together with an experienced candomblecist, to learn how to distinguish suitable from unsuitable ingredients. Visiting a market means making a journey into an Afro-Brazilian universe of consumption. In describing this process the authors compiled a list containing "an extremely diversified selection" of:

beads, bracelets, necklaces, soaps, perfumes, incense, rice, beans, maize, ginger, yams, pumpkins, honey, palm oil, straw mats, baskets, potteries, pots and pans, drums, dried shrimps, shells, flowers, snake's plants, melons, pineapples, mangos, cowrie shells, kola nuts, basil, textiles, parrot's feathers, eggs, silk, dye, European porcelain, lace, doves.<sup>11</sup>

a small crowd circulates among the scent of candles and herbs and among the acrid smell of the birds and the animals, [...] in this first step towards the initiation, which consists of going shopping for the rite of integration into Candomblé (Vogel et al. 1993, 13).<sup>12</sup>

All these items, and many more, are present and necessary for the rituals, and normally large quantities of these ingredients can be found in Candomblé *terreiros*. The diversity present in the natural landscape, both the Brazilian and the African, is represented and celebrated in the cosmological world of the orixás. Each element is indispensable to successfully complete a ritual. However, while the market can be seen as a chaotic and baroque mixture of different objects, plants, and animals, in the Candomblé house these items are re-culturalised into a new meaningful order.

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<sup>11</sup> In the original text this list is much longer. For the purpose of this text, I re-elaborated it in a shorter form.

<sup>12</sup> no cheiro das velas e das ervas e no odor acre de aves e animais, circula uma pequena multidão. [...] nesse primeiro passo de sua iniciação, que consiste em fazer as compras para o rito de integração ao candomblé.

During my fieldwork I often came across statements such as: “In Candomblé, almost no ritual can be performed without leaves”. However, I heard the same sentence being reported over and over in order to highlight the importance of other items - “almost nothing can be done without...” - fava beans, animal blood, *acaçá* (particular food item made of white cornmeal wrapped in banana leaves), but also sounds such as chanting or drumming, since certain rhythms and the human voice in particular are regarded as carrying a meaningful type of energy (Amaral and Silva 1992, 2). Therefore, no ritual can be performed without a combination of physical and performative ingredients that maintain their importance both as symbols and as vehicles of specific *axé*.

Recent studies in ethnobiology, ethnobotany and ecology dutifully collected and catalogued the different plants and animal species found in Candomblé houses for ritual purposes. Robert Voeks (1997, 99), who carried out an original work on Candomblé sacred flora, collected around 140 vegetal species in the *terreiros* he visited, while Léo Neto (2008, 123) detected 83 animal species for different purposes. In another study, Léo Neto, Voeks, Dias and Alves (2012) analysed the presence of a particular phylum, molluscs, and their use in Candomblé rituals. The authors, with extreme dedication, proceeded to classify different species of shells encountered in the 11 *terreiros* they visited. They wrote down and produced raw data about the different species, about where they found them and which was their ritual use.

Such a strict classification, which includes Linnean nomenclatures and descriptions of the different shells, is necessary to issues related to

conservationism and biodiversity, but it tells us very little about the use and the classification within the cultural context we are taking into consideration<sup>13</sup>. The fact that an Atlantic thorny oyster can be found in the ornamental altar of Yemanjá does not make it a unique case on its own. In fact, it is possible to assume that Yemanjá, as the goddess of the ocean, likes every type of shells, and it is equally possible to assume that the *pai de santo* who arranged the altar does not have any specific knowledge of marine biology, rather that he chose those shells for their beauty or availability. A shell is, for a non-expert, just a shell. However, by combining these hard data with thick ethnographic descriptions and dialogues, we can try to understand how our interlocutors select and perceive objects from the environment for a specific purpose.

For example, we can notice that cowrie shells are used for divination. Does it make any difference if we are dealing with a “money cowrie” or a “ring cowrie” instead? Probably not, since the shells maintain a peculiar shape, colour or dimension that is functional to their ritual use. What I want to argue here is that humans categorise reality in multiple ways, in relation to their use and to their cultural world of reference.

Another anecdote from my fieldwork may help to demonstrate this. In order to show my gratitude to the Candomblé community that helped me during my research in Italy, I once bought four pairs of artisanal earrings to put on the shrines as a gift. The jewels were made out of different types of shells,

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<sup>13</sup> Radcliffe Brown (1977, 42) took seashells and their morphological traits as an example of how social structures can be observed. I am not saying that paying attention to details and classifications is useless, however it must be acknowledged that social actors may employ different ways of classifying and experiencing reality.

two pairs were decorated with silver casting and other two with gold casting. As I presented them to the *pai de santo*, he said without hesitation, “The silver ones are for Yemanjá and the golden ones are for Oxum”. Indeed silver and gold are respectively the favourite colours of these water deities, but no attention was paid to the species of the mollusc.

Similarly, as Voeks shows in his work, textures of plants or scents are important in order to associate them with a specific deity. For example, it is not surprising that leaves with an uneven and rough surface belong to Omolou, the dreadful god of the smallpox, who is responsible for the health of his followers. Interestingly, popcorn represent his favourite food offering, since the puffed kernels (just like the leaves’ rough texture) are self-evident symbols of the blisters that cover his skin (1997, 125). Similarly, other associations will be made to pair each of the gods with their correspondence in the material world.

Candomblé plant classification bears little or no resemblance to its Western scientific counterpart. Floral structure is seldom considered, and phylogenetic hierarchy plays no role whatsoever in classification. Salience is wholly defined by those features- tactile, olfactory, visual, geographical, or medicinal - that suggest association with the archetypes of one or another deity (Voeks 1997, 128).

However, this is not only true for plants and animals, but it also applies to objects and artefacts. For example, keys are the emblem of Airá (a younger version of Xangô), but only a special type of key is acceptable.

Sacred mother: - He likes those ancient keys, they are not very common nowadays...

Sacred father: - (*putting two keys one against the other and revealing the shape of Xangô's weapon*) Do you get it now?

In order to highlight Airá's strong relationship with Xangô, his keys must be shaped like half of a *axe* (Xangô's weapon and symbol), and this feature would immediately make a candomblecist understand whether the object is suitable to be used for the orixá's ritual garnishments or not.

These few examples of materials, objects, plant and animal species that can be found in Candomblé houses are offered to show how the orixás are not only deities but vehicles for making sense of the world and its resources. The multiple reasons for certain ingredients, materials, shapes and colours to be chosen can be found in the intricate mythology in which the anthropomorphic gods love, fight and challenge each other. These stories not only explain the behaviours and temperaments of the deities, they also describe the relationship between different elements in the landscape.

This the case of the arch-enemies Oba and Oxum. In the myth, these two river deities represent two different types of femininity, and they fight for the love and attentions of their husband Xangô. Interestingly, these two characters find their proper equivalences in the Nigerian landscape, where two rivers called Osun and Oba cross in the state of Oyo and create an intersection of agitated waters.

This personification of the landscape is reminiscent of the notion of personhood amongst the Ojibwa described by Hallowell (1960). According to the author, some animals, monsters or spiritual beings, but also "objects"



as the thunder or the wind, fall under the classification of “other-than-human persons”, due to their specific agency and ability to interact. In a similar vein, I would argue that the orixás, and their counterparts in the landscape, could be considered “persons”, but only in the etymological sense of *persona* (from Latin: ‘mask’, ‘character’). In fact, the archetypical value of these deities not only reflects the temperaments of their devotees (each one trying to be consistent with their own role in the plot), but also singles out a special characteristic of the environment. As part of the diasporic process which ‘universalised’ African cults in Brazil, very specific orixás in the landscape became *topoi* that could be transposed wherever in the world. For instance, the orixá called *Osun* (Oxum in the Portuguese spelling), residing in her homonymous river Osun in Nigeria, started being worshipped in any river or waterfall.

### **1.3 Gods or cyborgs? The assentamentos**

So far, Candomblé seems to have the characteristics of a very particular form of animism, where some objects, events and phenomena are considered to be alive or to have a certain individuality, will or personality, in a way that the scientific Western thought would consider unacceptable. As many of my interlocutors stated in romantic terms “Candomblé is the religion of nature”<sup>14</sup>. However, what kind of nature are we talking about?

At the end of the 19th century a Brazilian forensic doctor, Raimundo Nina Rodrigues, conducted one the first academic researches on Afro-Brazilian Candomblé. The results of his work were published in *O animismo fetichista*

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<sup>14</sup> “Candomblé é a religião da natureza”

*dos negros bahianos* (1900) - “The fetishist animism of the Bahian negroes”

- offering detailed descriptions of ceremonies, offerings and rituals.

Influenced by the theories of Sir Edward Tylor, Nina Rodrigues saw in Candomblé the traits of a primitive belief which justified the racial inferiorities of African peoples and conceived of spirit possession as a form of pathological hysteria. However, he was also the first anthropologist to approach Afro-Brazilian cults with a scientific interest, classifying them under the label of “fetishist animism”. The word “fetish”, *feitiço* in the Portuguese language, means “sorcery”, “enchantment”, and originally it did not refer to a particular religious context. In fact, it was used to describe both European popular magic and exotic practices encountered overseas (Sansi-Roca 2007, 142).

The first author to mention the word “fetishism” is Charles de Brosses in his *Du culte des dieux fétiches* (1760), who analysed the worship of objects as a very primitive and rough form of religiosity. This titled is echoed by Bruno Latour’s *On the modern cult of the factish gods* (2011), where he highlights the ambiguity of this word with a little pun: *factish*, indeed reproduces the original etymology of *feitiço*, from the Portuguese *feito*, “made”, “fabricated”, but also “enchanted”, as in the Latin term “factura”, which means “spell” or “charm” and refers to something that is created, from *facere*, “to make”. Another close etymology is *facticiu(m)*, “fictitious”, “artificial”, not natural.

Therefore, how can a religion of “nature” include something that has been regarded as explicitly made up? What is “nature” and how does it manifest in the *factish*?

In order to understand the nature of these enchanted objects that carry such a powerful force, I attempted to recover different definitions from authors who tried to explain and translate the notion of what Nina Rodrigues called “fetish”, and what, in Candomblé communities, is normally referred to as *assentamento*.

If a person is called to become a *filho de santo*, the *pai* or *mãe de santo* would need to take care of his/her initiation, and prepare the *assento* of the personal orixá (the pot containing the *otã*, the sacred stones, receptacle of the gods’ force). (Verger 1981, 23)<sup>15</sup>

As explained by Verger, the *assentamento* or *assento* is a receptacle of sacred energy, a pot or a jar containing sacred stones, and it must be prepared as part of the initiation process.

Johnson (2002, 116) translates it literally as “the seat of the orixá” while Capone, in the same context, defines the verb *assentar* as “to seat the orixá’s energy in an altar representing the initiate’s head” (2010, 263). Again, the *assentamento* is regarded as a symbol not only of the deity but also of the devotee’s individuality, the head. Reginaldo Prandi describes it as “material representation of the devotee’s orixá”<sup>16</sup> (1995, 16) and Bastide uses the word “to fix” (*fixar*) in order to indicate the process for its preparation.

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<sup>15</sup> Se a pessoa for chamada a tornar-se filho de santo, caberá igualmente ao pai ou mãe de santo a tarefa de levar a bom termo a sua iniciação, e preparar o assento de seu orixá individual (o vaso que contém os ota, as pedras sagradas, receptáculos da força do deus).

<sup>16</sup> “representação material do orixá”

Muniz Sodré, also talks of “symbolic foundations”, underlining the function of the *assentamentos* as representation. However, he also peculiarly describes them as “planted” (*fundamentos simbólicos plantados*) in the *terreiro* (1988, 54). Similarly, Juana Elbein dos Santos uses the same word, “plantar” (2002, ed. or. 1972, 42), while Nei Lopes translates the verb *assentar* into English as “to plant axé [...] grounding the spiritual force of one or more Orisa” (2004 ,843), while others also tell of *assentamentos* being *enterrados*, “buried” (Ribeiro dos Santos 2006).

Other authors, for example Gordon, prefer to render the expression *assentar o santo* in a more periphrastic way: “arrange with the god for him [the god] to remain submissive” (1979, 241), describing how the spirit needs to be tamed through the process of fixing and installing it into something material.

In a much simpler way, the Yoruba name of the *assentamento* is *igbá*, which indicates a calabash gourd, typically used as a container for all sort of things. Therefore, we can assume that this strange object is, first of all, a receptacle for something. The immaterial force that needs to be contained — physically and figuratively — is normally represented by a stone, called *otã*, that needs to be collected from the same environment of the orixá that is going to be fixed in it (from the river, the ocean, the forest and so on). Roger Sansi-Roca elaborated extensively on the meaning of this ritual act of finding the right stone, the right inert “body” to be infused with life energy. Here we can note that such objects play an active role in being found and prepared, as they are not only going to be symbols but also physical extensions of the environment from which they come (Sansi-Roca 2009).

Similarly, the receptacle is not anymore a simple calabash, but it reflects the favourite materials of each orixá (a copper container for Oxum, a white porcelain bowl for Oxalá, an iron pot for Ogum and so on). These artificial representations concentrate the symbols, the colours and the essence of each deity, unveiling a very peculiar and culturally determined idea of what nature is.

But how is it possible to fix the sacred energy, the *axé*, in those *factishes*?

This process, just like the objects themselves, is surrounded by mystery and secrecy, and its practice is forbidden to non-initiated people. The key to its understanding is the word *ejé*, meaning “blood” in Yoruba<sup>17</sup>. However, the Yoruba notion of blood does not include only the animal blood obtained with the sacrifices, but also other types of “liquids” extracted from the mineral and vegetable realms. Moreover, Candomblé recognises three fundamental colours: *funfun* as “white”, *pupa* as “red” (including yellow and orange), *dídú* as “black” (including blue and green)<sup>18</sup>. Common types of *ejé* include palm oil (vegetable-red), chalk (mineral-white), chlorophyll (vegetable-black) and so on. In conclusion, *ejé* is any substance that is

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<sup>17</sup> For historical reasons, the lexicon of contemporary Brazilian Portuguese has been strongly influenced by different languages, including Yoruba and other African languages like those present in the Bantu linguistic area. However, the practitioners of Candomblé Ketu normally use a much wider range of Yoruba words that happen to be particularly important within the ritual context. For instance, within the terreiro people would say *ejé* instead of the plain Portuguese word “sangue” (blood), *obé* instead of *faca* (knife) or *ori* instead of “cabeça” (head).

<sup>18</sup> This tripartite scheme can also be encountered also in Victor Turner's classification of colours in his classic book *The Forest of Symbols*, where he compares the Ndembu symbolism of black, white and red with other African contexts (Turner 1967, 60-61).

regarded to contain great quantities of *axé*. According to Juana Elbein dos Santos (2002, 53-71) a combination of white-red-black materials from the different realms are necessary to represent the process of creation of a new individual and also of a new *assentamento*. The symbolism of the colours, on which I will not dwell here, is carefully described by dos Santos in a structuralist fashion typical of the French anthropological school she belonged to. This approach has been long criticised by other scholars of the same period, for example, Pierre Verger (Gonçalves da Silva 2000, 131). However, her descriptions have also been welcomed by Candomblé priests and priestesses, who often happen to be avid readers of anthropological literature as a form of legitimisation of their own rituals. In a cult based on oral tradition, anthropological descriptions and interpretations (especially concerning ritual practices that lack an explicit meaning) can sometimes take over the function of historical memoirs or even “sacred texts” (*ibid.* 146-147).

Indeed, during my fieldwork the Italian pai de santo recounted how he decided to trust the Candomblé priest who initiated him:

Pai Mauro: And he said, look, there are two French scholars who studied Candomblé for many years, they published a few books [...] so I left the next day to Nice and at the national library [...] I photocopied two books about Candomblé, one by Bastide, the other

by Verger. [...] And when I read them, I actually understood that what Pai. T. had said was true.<sup>19</sup>

As a result of this process, the anthropological representation became accepted as part of the indigenous oral narrative.

Once it has been “planted”, the *assentamento* becomes fully alive, and needs to be regularly taken care of as part of the followers’ ritual obligations. Candomblecists, indeed, do not refer to the *assentamentos* as separate from the deities, but they speak of them as the same thing. The rooms or little shacks that host the *assentamentos* of the orixás are called “the room of... (Oxalá, Xangô, etc.)”, people would talk to, and ask things of, the orixás speaking directly to the receptacles and the action of making sacrifices or offering food to the receptacles is referred to as *dar de comer ao orixá* (or *dar da mangiare all’orixá* in the Italian case study), meaning “to feed, to give food to the orixá”. Consequently, behaving in a disrespectful way in front of the receptacles is considered to be dangerous and unacceptable.

In the light of these observations, we might assume that the *assentamento* ‘is’ the orixá itself and the whole colonial discourse related to the “fetishist animism” was based on a rightful intuition. However, things are not that straightforward. When directly asked about these objects and their nature, candomblecists give quite different answers.

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<sup>19</sup> Pai Mauro: E lui dice, guarda, ci sono degli studiosi francesi che hanno studiato candomblé da molti anni e hanno pubblicato dei libri, solo che sono in francese... E quindi niente, parto il giorno dopo per Nizza, e alla biblioteca nazionale, sezione libri rari per altro...ho fotocopiato i libri, due libri, che parlavano di candomblé, uno di Bastide e uno di Verger [...] E leggendoli ho capito che effettivamente quello che diceva Pai T. era vero.



The room of Xangô (Axé Ilê Obá, São Paulo). ©Giovanna Capponi

Pai Mauro: But that is not the orixá, the orixá is everywhere, it is in nature... here [in the receptacle] is where the orixá eats. This is my kitchen, this is where I eat, but it is not my house. However, I can eat outside, as well.<sup>20</sup>

Sacred mother: We do this because it is easier for us, humans, to keep them [the orixás] closer to us.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, the *factish* happens to be made and fabricated in order to create a privileged channel of communication between the humans and the gods. The same offering that could be made in the corresponding natural environment, is comfortably made in the Candomblé house, which does not only resignify the African *urbs* but also the outer landscape. The

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20 Pai Mauro: Ma quello non è l'orixá, l'orixá è ovunque, nella natura, lì è dove l'orixá mangia. Questa è la mia cucina, qui è dove mangio, ma non è la mia casa. Però io posso anche mangiare fuori.

21 Mãe de santo: Noi lo facciamo perché è più facile per noi umani, per tenerceli più vicini.



*assentamento* is not the full and complete body of an invisible *persona*, but an oral cavity which speaks, eats, and channels the sacred energy. Indeed, within the *terreiro*, it seems that everything (spirits, people, objects and the whole house) “eats”, consumes and reclaims its portion of energy, in a constant manipulation or flow (Johnson 2002, 36).

At the same time, the *factish* loses its meaning and power when neglected and left starving. Pai Odé, a Brazilian priest who leads a *terreiro* in the region of São Paulo, once publicly reproached his “sacred sons” who abandoned or failed to take care of their *igbás*.

Pai Odé: That *igbá* has a meaning if people take care of it, otherwise... I do not collect tableware.<sup>22</sup>

By making a reference to the china plates and pots of the *assentamentos*, Pai Odé says that he does not have any intention of keeping in his *terreiro* an empty vessel that has lost its spiritual force. Indeed, neglected *igbás* dry out and lose their sacrality. On the other hand, *assentar o santo* is also thought as an irreversible process.

One of my interlocutors once expressed his concerns about his particular situation. After having an argument with his *pai de santo*, he decided to leave the *terreiro* where he had been initiated and move to another. However, his *assentamento* had been left in the old place, and he was worried about whether or not he had to go back and get it. After seeking advice from an elder, he was told that “the most important *assentamento* is

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<sup>22</sup> Pai Odé: Aquele *igbá* tem um significado somente si se cuida dele, se não... eu não faço coleção de louça.

the one you carry with you all the time: it is your head”. In fact, during the initiation process the novice's head and the receptacle will be both “filled” with the required *axé* and they will become a symbol one for the other. Despite the reassurance of the head being more important than the receptacle and that the latter could be just left aside without consequences, there seems to be a general anxiety about abandoning such an important object.

The term *ficar seco* or *secar*, meaning “to dry out”, is often used when talking about abandoned *assentamentos*. Indeed, it is common to see, close to the actual receptacles, a smaller pot with fresh water in it. Water is kept there exactly to avoid the *igbá* drying out. For the same reason it is possible to observe how, on the receptacles and other spots, fresh blood from the sacrificial chickens or doves is often covered with a few feathers, normally plucked from the chest of the same bird.

Baba Egbé: Even the feathers... the blood only runs in the veins of the animal, it is alive, then there is the plumage [...] The blood that falls on the ground is dead. Afterwards [...] we cover everything with feathers, in order to show that there is life circulating, there is energy there, it is alive... therefore, it is all a great alchemy. Without the plumage, the blood is dead; with the plumage [...] it is full of plumage, it is alive.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Baba Egbé: Até as penas... o sangue só corre nas veia do animal, está vivo, depois tem a plumagem [...] O sangue caído no chão está morto. A gente depois [...] cobre tudo de peninhas, para mostrar que está circulando a vida, a energia aí, tá vivo... então é tudo uma grande alquimia. Sem a plumagem o sangue é morto, com a plumagem [...] tá cheio de plumagem, já está vivo.

In the attempt to understand more about these mysterious inanimate *personas* (or animate objects) we encounter a peculiar hybrid: installed and planted, made of organic and non-organic material, considered to be a body or just a mouth, an extension of the natural landscape but also a powerful “stargate”, the *igbá* is both a mere receptacle and a social member of the religious community. Being the connection between the immaterial energy and the initiate, the *assentamento* condenses different places, individuals and realms in the same spot. In a sense it reminds us of Donna Haraway’s metaphor of the “cyborg” as a creature that overtakes the great divides: nature and culture, human and animal, animate and inanimate, organic and non-organic, symbolic and real.

The U.S philosopher and biologist was using the image of the cyborg as a “myth of political identity” for a utopian socialist-feminist world. I am willing to take this image out of its original context and test it as a tool to better understand objects, beings, and practices that transcend Western dichotomical categories. These hybrids are described as “creatures simultaneously animals and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted” (Haraway 1991, 149). They do not reproduce organically, and they share both human and animal features. Moreover, cyborgs are not entirely organic nor entirely artificial: they retain life, agency and organic tissues in hi-tech constructed bodies. Most importantly, as modern technology becomes more embedded, subtle, hardware-less, it manifests in the form of invisible energy, waves and signals that blurr the

line between the physical and the non-physical, acquiring almost spiritual characteristics.

It can be observed how also the *assentamentos* challenge many of these same dichotomies. They are made through the assemblage of objects that are found in nature (like the *otã*) but also crafted (the receptacle). They are brought to life through vivifying substances that include animal blood from the sacrifices and vegetable chlorophyll from the “banho de folhas”. They are, simultaneously, communication devices, symbols and physical bodies of an immaterial, invisible and divine force, and once “planted” they need to be regularly fed and refreshed. Indeed, the orixás can be said to have multiple physical bodies: the *assentamento*, their particular natural element and the body of the novice during trance possession, where humans become mere objects and receptacles themselves. As Haraway observes, writing about the cyborg, “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (ibid. 151).

Moreover, both cyborgs and *assentamentos* compell us to problematise the notion of agency. Latour (2011, 15-19) hypothesises a cultural misunderstanding between the Portuguese sailors and the indigenous population of Guinea. In this imagined dialogue, the Portuguese ask how is it possible for the gods to be made and built by human hands and at the same time to be “real” and “alive”, with their own agency over humans. In the eyes of the West African interlocutors, this action does not constitute a contradiction: the *fe(i)tiches* are “made”, and therefore, have power.

This issue emerges in myths and stories recounted by Candomblé practitioners about their relationship with the orixás. In these accounts,



*Assentamento* with plumage. ©Giovanna Capponi

Candomblecists express devotion and gratitude to the orixás, while also recalling how the deities claimed their “heads”, requested offerings, and descended upon the *aiyé*, the world of humans, moved by some sort of nostalgia for the taste and smell of human food. In the process of making and being made, it is difficult to understand who is in control and who is the servant. For this reason, Latour’s neologism helps us to define the *fe(i)tiche* as a new kind of technological device that goes beyond the control of human authority. Similarly, the *assentamento*-cyborg, made and crafted by humans and composed by animal and vegetable blood, but also by elements of particular natural landscapes, acquires its own agency and individuality.

Returning to my original question, what is this “nature” that Candomblé practitioners single out as the object of their worship? The *assentamentos* compel us to rethink the concept of nature as a conjunction of human and non-human, inert and alive, symbolic and ontological, individual and collective landscapes in which humans no longer stand at the centre. These

enchanted receptacles epitomise not only the relationship candomblecists develop with the landscape and with natural resources, but also the relationship with the immaterial world of the orixás.



*Assentamentos.* ©Giovanna Capponi

## 2. Myths and Heads: visible and invisible beings

*Fieldwork notes:*

*15/12/2015 - Ilê Axé Odé Tola (Ipiranga), São Paulo.*

*Pai Odé: [...] we have to remember the itãs. Itãs are legends, “stories”. So, I am telling you a story which recounts that at first there was no division between the orun, which is the city of the orixás, and the aiyé, which is the city of the humans. [...] So orixás and humans were living on the same level, in the same environment. [...] However, Obatalá, the representation of Olodumare, who is our supreme god, was very demanding, he is the orixá of white, peace, balance, silence, harmony. Humans, with their happiness, their celebrations, their “batuque”, their perfumes and smells, their dances... started annoying Obatalá. All the orixás were perfectly at ease with humans, and they had learned to eat what humans eat, to drink what humans drink, to dance to the sound of the instruments that the humans had created, they had learned to smell the food that humans used to prepare. But due to the demands of Obatalá... he thought that his world had been invaded and desrespected by the human beings.<sup>24</sup>*

*He went to Olodumare and asked to create a different world for him and the other*

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<sup>24</sup> Pai Odé: [...] a gente tem que lembrar dos itãs. Itãs são lendas, “história”. Então vou contar um itãn que diz que no primeiro momento não existia esta divisão entre o Orum, que é a cidade dos orixás, e o Ayé, a cidade humana. [...] Então orixá e homem viviam no mesmo patamar, no mesmo ambiente. [...] Só que como a representação de Olodumare, que seria o nosso deus supremo, que é Obatalá, era muito exigente, ele é o orixá do branco, da paz, do equilíbrio, do silêncio, da harmonia. O homem, com toda sua alegria, com sua festa, com seu batuque, seus perfumes, seus cheiro, com suas danças... passou a incomodar um pouco Obatalá. Todos os orixás conviviam perfeitamente com os homens, tanto que eles aprenderam a comerem o que homem come, eles aprenderam a beberem o que homem bebia, eles aprenderam a dançar ao som dos instrumentos que o homem criava, eles aprenderam a sentir o cheiro das comidas que o homem preparava. Então eles acabaram incorporando isso no ritmo de vida deles, todos os orixá. Mas devido as exigências de Obatalá, ele achou que seu mundo estava sendo invadido e desrespeitado pelos seres humanos.

*orixás... a city with different spaces, since he could not live with the mundane pleasures of humans, so the “orun” was created [...]. So, all the orixás, together with Oxum, went to ask Obatalá why he had taken that decision, and they were not happy with it because they missed what humans had, they missed the confusion and the noise, the drumming, the music, the smell of food, the drinks, they missed that vibration that human beings had. They wanted to go back to the earth, but Obatalá said that it was impossible to go back, they could only return in spiritual form, not in physical form. How to come back in physical form? They had to find a way to manifest in spirit. And according to the story they chose Oxum to determine how this process of return would be, so Oxum created the “elegun”, the person who enters into trance, she created the “yawó”, who would be chosen for the orixá to manifest and to have contact with the mundane life. [...] As a symbol of the creation of the yawó she took a chicken and made it that way, as the chicken multiplies, spreads in the world.<sup>25</sup>*

*The “yawó” is chosen by the orixá for him/her to manifest and to have contacts with everything that is earthly, and that the orixá loves. So she chose that symbol, she is considered the first Yalorixá [mãe de santo], and the yawó is the chicken as*

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<sup>25</sup> Ele foi até Olodumare e pediu que fosse criado um mundo diferente para ele e os demais orixás... uma cidade com espaços diferentes, porque ele não conseguia conviver com os prazeres dos homens, então foi criado o Orum [...] Então, todos os orixás, junto com Oxum, foram questionar à Obatalá porque ele havia tomado aquela decisão e eles não estavam contente, porque sentiam falta do que o homem tinha, estavam sentindo falta da bagunça, estavam sentindo falta do barulho, do atabaque, da música, do cheiro da comida, da bebida, daquela vibração que o homem tinha. Eles queriam retornar na terra, só que Obatalá disse que não era mais possível eles retornarem, ele só podiam retornar em forma espiritual, não em forma física. Como retornar em forma espiritual? Eles teriam que arrumar um meio para poder se manifestarem espiritualmente. E segundo o itân fala que escolheram Oxum para que ela determinasse como seria esse processo de retorno, então Oxum criaria o “elegun”, aquele que entra em trance, criaria o yawó, que seria o escolhido para que o orixá se manifestasse e pudesse ter contato com a vida mundana. [...] Como símbolo de criação do que era o yawó ela pegou uma galinha e criou, e como a galinha se multiplica, se espalha, a ideia de multiplicação, espalhada pelo mundo a fora.



*a symbol of multiplication. For this reason the guineafowl must be included in every ritual. [...] It could lack a goat, it could lack a dove, it could lack an ox, but it cannot lack a chicken*<sup>26</sup>.

## **2.1 On the visible and the invisible**

The *itān* (literally “story, tale”, *itán* in Yoruba) narrated by Pai Odé during this interview is one of the founding myths that explain the complex relationship between humans and deities in Yoruba cosmology.

The separation between the supernatural world and the mundane world, once united in the same space, is a literary *topos* in most mythological traditions. The Roman poet Ovid, in his work *Metamorphosis*, recounts a mythical age in which humans and gods used to interact side by side, but he also describes the separation of the Earth from the Sky in the process of creation (I, vv. 76-77). Similarly, the creation of the world operated by the biblical God is described as an act of separation and classification.

And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.”<sup>7</sup> So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so.<sup>8</sup> God called the vault “sky” (Genesis I, 6-8).

According to several mythological tales, the separation happens after the breach of a prohibition or an offence which marks the impossibility of

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<sup>26</sup> O yawó é o escolhido pelo orixá para que ele possa se manifestar e entrar em contato com tudo aquilo que é terreno, e que ele adora. Então é ela que escolheu, é ela que é considerada a primeira Yalorixá, e o yawó é a galinha como símbolo de multiplicação. É por isso que a galinha d’angola não pode faltar em nenhum ritual. Isso pode ser em qualquer casa de candomblé, em qualquer axé, em qualquer ramificação, é o elemento básico. Pode faltar um cabrito, pode faltar um pombo, pode faltar um boi, mas não pode faltar a galinha.

coexistence of men and deities. This is also the case in many West African traditions. For example, the Ashanti people of Ghana tell how the deity used to live close to humans, but moved to the sky because a woman constantly poked him with her pestle in the act of pounding cereals. Similarly, according to the Mende people of Sierra Leone, god left the Earth because humans were asking him too many favours (Mbiti 1989, 94). Another Yoruba version of the previous myth tells how the orixás separated the *orun* from the *aiyé* after a man touched the sky with dirty hands, or after a child broke the prohibition of entering in the *orun*. From that moment, Sánmò, the atmosphere, has been interposed between the two worlds. The metaphor of the calabash gourd cut in half, where the inferior half represents the *aiyé* and the superior part represents the *orun*, is often used while recalling this myth. The *orun* is defined as “the abstract double of the whole *aiyé*<sup>27</sup>” (dos Santos 2002, 55-56).

However, Pai Odé’s version of the *itãn* introduces an interesting follow-up to the story. As Obatala reaches his goal of living in peace without being disturbed by the noise of human activities, the other orixás are unhappy with the decision. For this reason, they designate Oxum, the female orixá of fertility, to create the first *yawó* in the form of a guineafowl, so that they could descend again to earth through trance possession. This explanation gives a new interpretation to the relationship between humans and deities, in which the latter are those depending on the former, and not viceversa. In fact, despite the offence caused to Obatalá, the story makes it clear that the

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<sup>27</sup> “o doble abstrato de todo o *aiyé*”

orixás would rather live among the humans than in the spiritual world of the *orun*. The chicken, particularly the guineafowl, stands as a symbol and a vehicle of this process.

The peculiarity of this relationship is also highlighted in another myth, which recounts how the deities gave the oracle (Ifã) to humankind. This story is set in a time in which the humans had completely forgotten about the gods, who were hungry and unable to hunt enough food for themselves. For this reason, the orixás started sending epidemics and misfortunes to humankind in order to receive sacrifices in return, but without any result. In fact, humans did not know what those terrible events meant and they were not afraid to die. Therefore, Exu, a sort of Yoruba trickster and messenger of the gods, taught humans how to interpret the oracle of Ifã, composed by sixteen pieces of coconut shell. Ever since, humans have been able to know what will happen to them in the future, and they also have the possibility of protecting themselves from misfortune by sacrificing animals to the orixás (Vogel et al. 1993, 16).

Once again, the gods are those trying to catch the attention of the humans in order to be fed. However, this myth introduces a mutual convenience in the relationship, since both parties gain something from it. The deities obtain sacrifices and the humans earn the ability of foreseeing and controlling their destinies. This myth is not concerned with the separation of the supernatural and the mundane. Rather, its central element is the act of divination as a tool of communication between the two worlds.

This founding myth sets the basis for many other stories to be inserted in the mythological anthology. As a basic structure of these stories the protagonist,

in order to succeed in a particular enterprise, consults the oracle and is often asked to sacrifice a chicken to guarantee a favourable outcome of his/her actions.

An exemplary case of this structure is the myth of how the modest hunter Oxotokanxoxô became divinised and turned into Oxossi, the hunter orixá who lives in the forest. I will here resume and translate the *itãn* related by Pierre Verger (1981, 110-11). This tale is set in the kingdom of Ifé, where the king is giving a great banquet to celebrate the yam harvest. However, the feast is threatened by the evil witches Iyámi Osorongà, who send a giant bird that flies over the palace intimidating the crowd.

So they decided to call Oxotogun, the hunter with twenty arrows, from Ido; Oxotogí, the hunter with forty arrows, from Moré; Oxotadotá, the hunter with fifty arrows, from Ilarê, and finally Oxotokanxoxô, the hunter with one single arrow, from Iremã. The first three hunters were very self-confident and somewhat arrogant, but despite their ability and the size of the prey, they failed in the task of hitting the bird with their arrows. When Oxotokanxoxô's turn arrived, his mother, who had him as her only son, quickly consulted a *babalawô* [priest of Ifã, specialist in interpreting the oracle] who said: "Your son is one step from death or from glory. Let us make an offering and death will turn into glory". She took a chicken she had sacrificed and she left it on the street opening its breast [with a knife] [...] and she said three times: "I want the breast of the bird to receive this offering". At that same moment her son shot his only arrow. The bird loosed the enchantment that protected it in order to receive the offering in its breast, but instead Oxotokanxoxô's stroke it deeply. The bird fell, writhed and

died. Everybody started dancing and singing: “Oxowussi! Oxowussi!”  
meaning “Oxo is famous!”<sup>28</sup>

In all these examples of mythical narratives, humans and supernatural entities develop a very particular relationship based upon exchange, communication and renegotiation, where animals and chickens act as intermediaries, either as a source of food or carriers of the sacred symbols of trance possession. In both cases they are present as links and vessels for a dialogue to take place.

## 2.2 Non-human *personas* and entities

As I suggested in the previous chapter, the orixás are to be understood as *personas* who draw their characteristics from both their location in the landscape and the myths that recount their behaviours and interrelational

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<sup>28</sup> Decidiram, então, trazer sucessivamente Oxotogun, o caçador das vinte flechas, de Ido; Oxotogí, o caçador das quarenta flechas, de Moré; Oxotadotá, o caçador das cinquenta flechas, de Ilarê, e finalmente Oxotokanxoxô, o caçador de uma só flecha, de Iremã. Os três primeiros muitos seguro de si e uns tanto fanfarrões, fracassaram em suas tentativas de atingir o pássaro, apesar do tamanho deste e da habilidade dos atiradores. Chegada a vez de Oxotokanxoxô, filho único, sua mãe foi rapidamente consultar um babalaô que lhe declarou: “ Seu filho esta a um passo da morte ou da riqueza. Faça uma oferenda e a morte tornar-se-á riqueza” . Ela foi colocar na estrada uma galinha, que havia sacrificado, abrindo-lhe o peito [...]: “ Quero o peito do pássaro receba esta oferenda”. Foi no momento preciso que seu filho lançava sua única flecha. O pássaro relaxou o encanto que o protegia, para que a oferenda chegasse ao seu peito, mas foi a flecha de Oxotokanxoxô que o atingiu profundamente. O pássaro caiu pesadamente, se debateu e morreu. Todo mundo começou a dançar e cantar: “ Oxó ( ) é popular! Oxó é popular! Oxowussi ( wusi)! Oxowussi!! Oxowussi!!”

qualities. As it often occurs, choosing a particular term to describe an indigenous concept also reflects a specific methodological choice. By examining the anthropological literature concerning religious and animistic practices, an increasing number of scholars are criticising the common usage of the word “spirit” or “gods” to describe whichever sort of (possibly) immaterial and invisible beings conceived, worshipped or feared in a local context. Indeed, the choice of such a generic word shows the lack of understanding of what those beings really are, and what makes them different from animals, humans or objects. In most cases, the term “spirit” is referred to as something that the anthropologist clearly did not encounter as easily as the natives do. Some authors tried to disentangle the notion of “spirit” from the commonly associated notions of “invisible” and “non-material” by coining new terms (Praet 2009, 738). Similarly, the word “entity”, as a literal translation of the Portuguese *entidade* (mostly used in Umbanda), seems to work in Afro-Brazilian contexts because it recalls an existing “being” with its own individuality and specific agency. At the same time, the term is not necessarily associated with the notion of non-materiality. (Espírito Santo and Blanes 2014, 13-15). Other authors such as Jack Hunter, while comfortable with the term “spirit”, decided to investigate the ontological nature of supernatural beings by directly asking questions to one of the spirits evoked during a séance (Hunter 2015, 77). This case proves to be very interesting because it takes into account the agency of non-human entities in the social context starting from the practice of fieldwork and does not only refer to it as a social construct.

As Viveiros de Castro (2013, 484) puts it, “It is not a matter of imagining a form of experience, if you like, but of experiencing a form of imagination.” According to this author, the anthropologist needs to take into consideration the material consequences of *indigenous* concepts, not as mere worldviews but as alternative realities. This approach, that goes under the label of “ontological turn”, although considered too radical and problematic by many scholars, presents a new way of analysis which helps to escape from the notion of “social representation of reality”.

Deriving his proposal from Deleuze’s thought, Viveiros de Castro dismisses the interpretation of social phenomena in favour of the *multiplication* of the world, “populating it with all those things expressed that do not exist outside of their expression” (Deleuze 1969, 335).

In a similar vein, I would like to detach my description of the orixás from the standard and Western notion of non-material and supernatural beings. In fact, my fieldwork explored how the orixás manifest themselves especially in the body, and particularly in a multiplicity of “bodies”: the body/object of the *assentamentos*, the body of the candomblecists in trance, the body of the correspondent elements in the landscape and, finally, in the non-material world of the *orun*. Moreover, the presence of the orixás in the lives of my interlocutors overlaps and coexists with a variety of culturally-determined perceptions of the world. The belief in orixás or the interaction with non-human entities and *personas* does not correspond to a denial of scientific theories about the universe, the environment and natural resources. On the contrary, the world of the orixás seems to be adjoined to a mosaic of different aspects, like national identities, religious upbringing and personal

formation and experiences of Candomblecists. Admittedly, Candomblé practitioners describe the world of the orixás and the religious practices (the cooking of the offerings, the herbal baths, the trance, etc.) as full of enchantment and magic. As a sacred mother told me: *É um mundo mágico!* (“It is a magic world”). This sentence implies not only a notion of beauty and captivation of Candomblé but, more importantly, the existence of a level of reality, a world, where the enchantment takes place. This peculiar feature reminds the story of a man, Walmir, reported by Mattijs Van de Port in the book *Ecstatic Encounters* (2011). When asked about his initial approach to Candomblé, to the author’s bewilderment, Walmir’s account does not start with exotic entities or spirit encounters, but with the sighting of a flying saucer. Walmir, who is described as a “a journalist, an academic, a man of facts”, considers the sighting of the flying saucer as a fundamental experience in his personal story, since it broke the ground for the unveiling of other realms of possibility.

All of this underscored the logic of the *truth event*: an unsolicited and out-of-the-ordinary event occurs – ‘too weird to be true’ – and yet, the sheer factuality of its occurrence, the undeniable reality of its having taken place, forces one to reconsider all definitions of the possible and the impossible. It was thus that Walmir’s capacity to believe was expanded: it was thus that he was made to accept the presence of an *absent truth* that brings the world to order (Van de Port 2011, 195-196).

According to the myths already recounted, the *orun* is to be understood as a world of “spiritual doubles”. However, this conception bears little resemblance to the Platonic “theory of forms”. In fact, Plato considers the



*eidós* (form, idea) to be perfect and immutable, while its material counterpart is just an imperfect and corruptible copy. To Plato, the true essence of everything lies in this timeless and spaceless world called *hyperuranion*, literally meaning “beyond heaven” (Phaedrus, [247]c). Sodré (1983, 90-125) criticises Plato’s philosophical theory — very influential in Western thought — of an ultimate “truth” to be achieved, and puts it in opposition to the initiate “secret” of West African philosophy. He describes the *orun* as an “invisible space” that interpenetrates the *aiyé*, the visible space. Everything that is done in one of the two worlds is reflected in the other in a game of exchange and communication, where the two levels influence one another.

This notion emerged several times during my fieldwork. On one occasion, the *orun* has been mentioned by an incorporated *erê*. *Erês* are described sometimes as “children entities” or infantile energies who sometimes are evoked as intermediaries between the orixá and the *yawó*. While the orixá moves the novice’s body with caution and solemnity, the incorporation of the *erê* takes the form of a joyous and noisy manifestation. The *erê* highlights childish characteristics in the novice’s body, like a high-pitched voice, frolicking movements and sudden weeping or laughter. The incorporated *erês* are treated as, and taken care of by, the other participants exactly as children.

In a particular episode I witnessed, an incorporated *erê* had been asked by another initiate — in the cheerful way someone would use while talking to children — where was her dummy. The *erê*’s answer was: “I have two of those: one is in her house [pointing at the person she was incorporating],

one is up there [pointing at the sky]<sup>29</sup>”. On this occasion, the entity itself makes explicit that even a trivial object as a child’s dummy, if present in the material world, must exist in the realm of doubles.

In a second example, I heard a more experienced candomblecist saying to a recently initiated one, “Now you are ‘made’ (*feita*, synonym for initiated), now you exist in the *orun*<sup>30</sup>”. This statement shows that not only the orixás manifest themselves in multiple bodies, but also that humans, who appear self-evidently visible and material, start having a degree of invisibility once inserted in Candomblé social and ritual relations. This does not mean that one’s invisible double does not exist before the initiation, but it simply shows that the link between the two worlds has not yet been sealed.

Tata Kajalacy: It is like this. I am looking at Giovanna, but Giovanna... there is another invisible Giovanna, there is a visible world and an invisible world... alive! Not a spirit! I am looking at Giovanna but there is another Giovanna who is not visible, that is the *nkisi*!<sup>31 32</sup>

Tata Kajalacy, a sacred father from the coastal area of the state of São Paulo, explains that the orixá, or *nkisi* is exactly the “invisible double” living in the

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<sup>29</sup> “Tenho dois: um na casa dela, outro lá em cima.”

<sup>30</sup> “Agora você é feita, você existe no orun”

<sup>31</sup> *Nkisi* is a Bantu word to say orixá, and it is used mostly in Candomblé Angola. This Candomblé “nation” presents elements that originated in the Bantu and Central African area, however in nowadays Brasil it also shows a very similar structure to the most widespread Candomblé Ketu of Yoruba origin. For a wider account and history of Candomblé Angola, see Capone 2010 and de Figueiredo (ed.) 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Tata Kajalacy: É assim, eu estou vendo a Giovanna, mas a Giovanna, tem uma outra Giovanna invisível, tem um mundo visível e invisível... vivo! Não espírito. Eu estou vendo a Giovanna mas tem uma outra Giovanna que não é visível, esse é o *Nkisi*.

*orun*, and he stresses that it is not a “spirit” (here meaning not dead), but a living being. Non-initiated people can, in certain cases, experience an uncontrolled form of trance possession, which is normally interpreted as a calling from the orixá itself for the person to become a *yawó* and for the connection to be formalised through the initiation ritual. As part of contemporary Candomblé praxis, after this particular event the person is woken up and asked if he or she wants to accept the orixá’s invitation or not. However, according to the oral tradition and narrative about this phenomenon, only a few decades ago initiation was regarded as compulsory for the person who, as they say in Portuguese, *bolou no santo* or *caiu no santo* (literally “he/she fell in the saint”): indeed, one world, the *orun*, seems to be far more sacred and authoritative than the other, the *aiyé*.

As can be noted, the many *itãs* recounted by different religious authorities, books, historians and anthropologists do not present a coherent version of facts to be believed as utterly true, nor these are the intentions of most of my interlocutors.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> My case study differs from those studies concerning animist and Amerindian conceptions of the world in South America. In fact, while it is common to be brought up as a Candomblecist or Umbandist, it is equally widespread to approach these religions at an adult age. This means that most of my interlocutors have been raised as part of other religious groups (mostly Catholic Christians) and then decided to join a *terreiro*. Therefore, the “native” point of view of West African cosmology overlaps often with a different type of upbringing which can be influenced by the ethnic or national origin of the person — Brazil presents a demographic mosaic of second-generation migrants from the Mediterranean region (Italy, Spain, Portugal), Lebanon, Armenia and Japan, just to mention a few, in addition to African and Amerindian descendants — but also by the wider cultural changes typical of an emergent country projected in the global market.

However, myths provide an insight into the relationship between the different —visible and invisible, human and non-human — actors who populate the terreiros.

As Hallowell explains:

myths are broadly analogous to the concrete material of the texts on which the linguist depends for his derivation, by analysis and abstraction, of the grammatical categories and principles of a language (1960, 27).

However, not only the myths, but also the general narratives about specific indigenous notions can be useful for understanding the multiple worlds in which people live. Here I would like to compare two different explanations I received about two very similar entities, the orixá Oxumaré (Candomblé Ketu) and the *nkisi* Angorô (Candomblé Angola).

Pai Mauro.: Oxumaré is the god of transformation and he is the cosmic force that is released on the Earth through water, not river water but rain water. In fact, he is the son of the goddess of the rain, Nana, and brother of Obaluayé and Yewá. He is represented as a snake who bites his own tail, symbolising the continuity of *axé*, movement and nature cycles.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Pai Mauro: Oxumaré è il dio della trasformazione e della forza cosmica che è rilasciata sulla terra attraverso l'acqua, non quella del fiume, ma quella della pioggia. Infatti, è figlio della signora della pioggia, Nanã, e fratello di Obaluwaiyê e di Yewá. Rappresentato come un serpente che si morde la sua stessa coda, sta a simboleggiare la continuità dell'*axé*, il movimento e la ciclicità.

Tata Kajalacy: Angorô is the process through which water evaporates and then condenses into clouds, and then is taken away by Matamba, the wind, and when the temperature changes it becomes rain<sup>35</sup> [...]

While Pai Mauro, a sacred father belonging to Candomblé Ketu, describes Oxumaré with his mythical attributes (“son of Nana, brother of Obaluayé...”) and concentrates the description on his symbols and representations, Tata Kajalacy, a sacred father of Candomblé Angola, focuses on Angorô’s role in the environment, giving a detailed explanation of the physical and atmospheric process for which the *nkisi* is responsible. While a Western reader may more easily relate to the second description for its resemblance to a scientific illustration of the water cycle, it is necessary to point out that both the mythical and the ecological narrative provide interesting and compelling accounts of human experience and perception of non-human *personas*.

### 2.3 Orixás: a quick guide

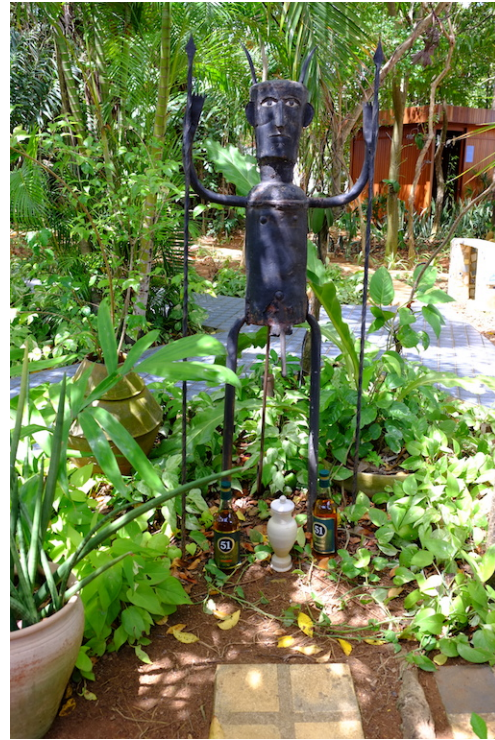
This section will provide a basic explanation of the main features that characterise the different orixás. In fact, the pantheon of the deities and entities can be better explained in its totality than by a simple glossary. The orixás are generally divided into groups according to their relations, similarities and mythological accounts by candomblecists themselves; whether feminine or masculine, cold or warm, or connected to the elements

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<sup>35</sup> Angorô é o processo de evaporação da água que depois condensa nas nuvens, depois é levado por Matamba, que é o vento, e quando muda a temperatura aí vem a chuva.

of water, fire or earth. Despite the fact that in the African context there was a great number of African *personas* that used to be worshipped, those who made it to Brazil and whose cult is widespread in Candomblé Ketu number just about twenty. However, the orixás can be also seen as macro-categories that include a multiplicity of manifestations of the same energy. For example, Yemanjá (the goddess of the oceans briefly described in the previous chapter) has the mother-like qualities of care and tenderness, but in the manifestation (“*qualidade*” in Portuguese) of Yemanjá *Ogunté* she also shows the qualities of a fierce warrior because she is influenced by Ogum, the blacksmith orixá of warfare. Indeed, the ocean is not only a source of food and nurture but at times also a very cruel, agitated and dangerous environment. In this example, Yemanjá *Ogunté* represents this particular manifestation of the waters, and therefore it would be very different from Yemanjá *Olokun*, who represents the deep sea. Each orixá has roughly between ten and twenty *qualidades*, increasing the number of deities in the pantheon (Voeks 1997, 54). However, the details of each one are often kept secret and regarded to be useful strictly for ritual purposes.

It is common practice to start with Exu. Indeed, Exu is the first entity who needs to be greeted and honoured before every ritual. He embodies all the characteristics of the typical “trickster”: he is an interpreter and a dynamic messenger who has the function of carrying the offerings from the visible to the invisible world, but he can also be a terrible troublemaker when people forget to observe their duties to him. A voracious and quick eater, his offerings are normally placed at the crossroads and by the doors, as he



Exús guarding the entrance of the Axé Ilê Obá, São Paulo (left) and the Casa do Rio Vermelho, Salvador (right) ©Giovanna Capponi

embodies the communication between two realms. His *assentamento* is often put at the entrance of the *terreiros* as a gatekeeper, represented as a sort of devilish figure holding a trident and showing a disproportionately sized phallus (da Silva 2015). This way of representing Exu certainly exposes the historical traces of the initial syncretism with the Catholic tradition. Indeed, this cunning trickster has often been associated with the Christian Devil, contributing to the stigmatisation of Afro-Brazilian religious manifestations (Capone 2010, 36-38). Nevertheless, his attributes of fertility, protection, communication, economic prosperity and joviality make him an essential character to be displayed in various profane locations. Beside the *terreiros*, assentamentos of Exu can be found in the middle of marketplaces, behind the doors of community centres, cultural associations, samba schools and even sex shops in the centre of São Paulo.

His unpredictable nature makes him a difficult entity to deal with, therefore many Candomblé sacred fathers avoid initiating people to this particular orixá. In the words of Tata Kajalacy: “To initiate someone of Aruvaiá [another name for Exu in the Candomblé Angola tradition] means only to have troubles in the *terreiro!*”<sup>36</sup>. Indeed, when the divination shows that someone is a legitimate son or daughter of Exu, he or she is often initiated as a son or daughter of Ogum.

Ogum is the irascible orixá of warfare and metal objects. He embodies manly strength but also innovation and technology, he forged the first metal tools and is responsible for human technological progress. Inventor and pioneer, Ogum is described by Pierre Verger (1981) as “the man who, despite having water in his house, bathes in blood”. His violent and earthy character emerges in several myths in which he is involved in impulsive homicides, choleric bursts and incestuous rape. However, it is precisely this impetus which makes him a perfect ally to those who need to open the way (*abrir caminhos* in Portuguese) for difficulties to be overcome. These hot-tempered qualities are shared with other orixás, especially those connected with fire, like Xangô, the orixá of justice, thunder and stone quarries. Xangô is the only orixá who appears in Nigerian historical records as one of the kings of the city-state of Oyo, suggesting that some Yoruba gods are probably historical heroes who have been deified post-mortem (Falola and Genova 2009, 332). Xangô’s royal posture makes him different from Airá, his younger and whiter version, although the two share symbols and

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<sup>36</sup> Tata Kajalacy: “Iniciar Aruvaiá é só para ter problemas no terreiro!”





Representations of Yemanjá and Oxum (Ilê Axé

Alaketu Aira, Arborio) ©Marta Ferri

*ferramentas* (special tools or weapons), especially the double-edged axe called *oxe*. Other deities connected to fire are two of Xangô's wives: Oyá-Iansã, the voluptuous orixá of the wind, thunder and storm and Oba, the passionate Amazon of the Yoruba pantheon. Both these feminine deities are represented as strong warrioresses and are linked to fire and death. In fact it is the wind, a manifestation of Oyá, that carries the souls of the dead to the *orun*, while Oba is one of the archetypical feminine ancestors. Nowadays both orixás represent different faces of feminine power and emancipation.

However, the most famous feminine orixás are typically connected with water. Two deities in particular embody different stages of maternity. Oxum, the orixá of fresh water, rivers, waterfalls, etc., is represented as a young and

sensual girl. She is attractive and delicate, responsible for conception, pregnancy and birthgiving, but also for romantic love and relationships. Yemanjá, already briefly described, is connected to the ocean and represents motherhood at its fullest, considered to be the mother of all the orixás, protector of family affairs and kinship. Although these two *Yabás*, as feminine orixás are called (meaning “mothers” but also “queens”), are characterised by a caring and cool-tempered attitude, they still retain some warrior-like qualities. For these reasons they both hold a mirror (*abebé*) in one hand (a symbol of feminine vanity but also of water reflectance) and a sword in the other. While Oxum is always dressed in golden garments, Yemanjá’s favourite colour is silver. The ultimate realisation of this maternal energy is embodied in Logunedé, the child orixá who, according to the myth, Oxum had with the hunter god Oxossi. Logunedé’s energy is present whenever the forest and the river meet in the landscape. For this reason, he is often depicted as sexually ambiguous, as he retains the qualities of both his parents; vanity and beauty from his maternal side but also agility and astuteness from his paternal side (Lopes 2002).

Oxossi and Logunedé are both part of another cluster of orixás — the hunters. Hunting deities are more cool-tempered than warrior deities and display quickness and skillfulness instead of strength and power. Many ethnographic studies have shown how hunting is often deeply connected to and even dependent on ritual activities, as hunters are required to engage with visible and invisible dwellers of the forest, to tame the spirits of the ancestral hunters (Turner 1967, 282-290) and to attract or negotiate the

killing with the spirit of the animal (Willerslev 2004, 643-645). Yoruba hunter deities fit in this same framework, as their energy is tied to prosperity and abundance (of food/preys) but also to witchcraft. Other hunting deities are the previously mentioned Oba and Yewá (the snake goddess of mystery and unknown places).

Yewá can also be classified as part of a group of orixás termed the *Kerejebe* (which in the oral tradition is translated as “little royal family”). This cluster is composed of Nanã, Omolu, Yewá, Oxumaré and Ossain. The most interesting features of these orixás are their intimate connection with death and life, sorcery and mystery, illness and healing, transformation and metamorphosis, which make them some of the most feared and revered deities in the whole pantheon. The already-mentioned Yewá and Oxumaré are both represented as snakes. While Oxumaré is related to rain, the water cycle and divination, Yewá crawls and lives where no one else has ever been, representing unexplored places and experiences.

Nanã, the oldest of all female orixás, is connected with death and life cycles. Like all great mothers, her element is water, particularly the muddy water of ponds and swamps. Omolu is always represented completely covered by a straw hood which serves the purpose of covering his skin, horribly devastated by smallpox blisters. Like a Greek *pharmakós*, he represents the illness but also the cure to every disease, and he is worshipped as a powerful healer. Similarly, Ossain — the orixá of vegetation and *leaves (folhas)* — holds the most secret knowledge about the curative and mystical properties of the different plants. While all the plants and vegetation belong to Ossain,

each orixá has his or her set of favourite plants, the properties of which represent their respective temperaments. For example, bathing in an infusion of leaves (*banho de folhas*) dedicated to Oyá-Iansã may heat the body and even cause tingling sensations (Voeks 1997, 129). Conversely, an infusion prepared with the leaves of Oxalá will have cooling and calming properties.

Oxalá is the oldest orixá and he is considered to be the father of all the other deities. Peaceful and wise, he is represented as an old man walking with the help of the *opaxorô*, a particular sceptre displaying different symbols of creation and power. When possessed by Oxalá, the novices bent over and dance with precarious and uncertain movements, often needing the help of other people to be able to stand. Oxalá has a taboo against dark and reddish colours, as well as with loudness, preferring white clothes, peace and silence. This important orixá allows us to explain the role of the orixás *funfun*, “white”, along with Candomblé “obsession” for colour symbolism. Such deities are those who took part in the process of creation, like Oddudwa (sometimes depicted as a sort of feminine version of Oxalá whose cult has been absorbed by his masculine counterpart, sometimes as a masculine divinised ancestor), Oxaguiã (a younger and more agitated version of Oxalá). These orixás do not accept offerings with palm oil, and not even dark stains in their initiates’ clothes, and all the other orixás, who normally show their colourful dresses each one according to their tastes, are dressed in white during the celebrations in honour of Oxalá. All the different orixás are considered emanations of (or subjected to) Olodumare, a supreme god that is regarded to be too distant and impossible to relate to by humans.

Clearly, Candomblé pantheon is articulated around different polarities: orixás can be hot or cold, agitated or calm, and their energies are evoked and manipulated according to strict rules, taboos, sympathies and correspondences that involve temperature, characters and colours, but also myths and natural elements.



A Candomblé house decorated with paintings and symbols of the orixás (Ilê Axé Alaketu Odé Tolá, Juquitiba) ©Giovanna Capponi

## 2.4 Umbanda entities

It is necessary to offer a brief outline of the different Umbanda spiritual entities because, most often, Candomblé and Umbandist practices merge and happen in the same ritual space. Despite the controversies that arise from the mutual “contamination” of different Afro-religious expressions, these hybrid modalities of operating are much more common than the supposedly “purer” African ones (Capone 2010, 95). During my fieldwork, I

came to realise how these conflicts and approximations between Umbanda and Candomblé revolved around many topics that were related to my interests, for example sacrificial rituals and relationship with the environment. Therefore, in order to highlight the broader sociological aspects of sacrificial rituals, some Umbanda centres became part of my enquiry. While Candomblé public celebrations happen mostly during the weekend, Umbanda *giras* (sessions) are commonly held during weekdays in urban areas, and are normally much more accessible to the wider public. Moreover, Candomblé's public ceremonies retain some original elements that make them hardly intellegible to the non-committed sympathiser: the chantings are in Yoruba, the interaction with the orixás is limited and the dances only represent a display of power and *axé* for the non-initiated. Conversely, Umbanda sessions are held in Portuguese and the different “entidades” — spirits of people who lived in the past — possess the bodies of the mediums not only to dance but especially to work (*trabalhar*), meaning to attend the people in their needs, be it the need of spiritual cleansing (*limpeza espiritual*) or counselling sessions (*consultas*) — when the entities are asked for help with, and advice on, everyday problems by the attendees. These activities are described as *caridade*, “charity”. As an Umbandist sympathiser told me once: “Charity is listening<sup>37</sup>”, meaning that listening to people's problems and advising them is the way entities have of doing their good deeds and to spiritually evolve in the afterlife. I will briefly describe the different types of entities I encountered and with whom I interacted during my fieldwork.

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<sup>37</sup> “Caridade é escutar”

Exu is also a key figure in Umbanda. However, in this context Exus have a very different role from the one of the Exu-orixá encountered in Candomblé terreiros. They are considered spirits of delinquents or street thieves, who are not malevolent but are helpful in fighting evil forces, since they have been living in close contact with them all their lives. The feminine counterparts of the Exus are the Pombagiras and Ciganas (gypsies), sometimes are regarded as the spirits of prostitutes, who laugh obscenely and like to drink expensive beverages. They are considered *entidades de esquerda* (entities of the left), for their ability in dealing with dangerous situations. Baba Dirce, leader of an Umbandist centre in São Caetano do Sul, (São Paulo), offered me this example:

It is like this: you go to a party and you bring Maria Aparecida with you (pointing at a lady in the room) who is nice and calm, and it is all good... but then there is a fight during the party, can she defend you? No. So you also have to bring with you someone strong, you need to bring someone like Exu.<sup>38</sup>

Conversely, “entities of the right” (*entidades da direita*) are regarded as wise and luminous spirits in charge of healing and giving advice. As it can be noted, the entities of Umbanda have little in common with the Yoruba deities. Instead, their descriptions draw directly from an imaginary situated at the beginning of the twentieth century in Brazil (when Umbanda started developing as a religion). Their most widespread characters are the *Pretos*

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<sup>38</sup> Baba Dirce: É assim: você vai a uma festa, e leva com você Maria Aparecida, que é bonzinha e calma e é muito bom... pero depois tem uma briga na festa, ela vai poder te defender? Não. Então tem que levar também uma pessoa forte, tem que levar uma pessoa como Exu.

*Velhos* (the Old Blacks), pious spirits of old slaves, and the *Caboclos*, spirits of the indigenous people who died during the colonial times. Moreover, there are the *Boiadeiros* (cowboys), the *Baianos* (people from Bahia) the *Marinheiros* (sailors) amongst many others.



*Preto Velho* (Axé Ilé Oba, São Paulo) ©Giovanna Capponi

## **2.5 Animals: a particular ingredient**

Many anthropologists have noted the presence of animals in Candomblé terreiros, but only a few scholars acknowledged their importance at different levels. Animals are present in myths, rituals and as symbols in many aspects of religious practice. In mythological accounts, while people and deities normally have given names, animal species are often nameless characters, because the species which they represent already implies a conjunction of features and characteristics. However, this does not dispossess animals of their specific agency and personhood (Willerslev 2004, 633, 632). Even in sacrificial rites, in Candomblé as in other ethnographic contexts, animals are



not simply killed as a mere source of blood, meat or fur/feathers, but they are often prepared, consulted and regarded as conscious and self-willed beings.

Together with food crops, plants and seeds, many African animal species were brought to the Americas during the Atlantic Slave Trade. These included cattle, sheep, goats and poultry. The main reason for the slave cargo ships storing and transporting large quantities of food crops and live animals during their trips across the Atlantic was to provide enough food for the slaves to survive until their arrival. In this way, food and livestock had been introduced into the Americas, and plants that were endemic of the African continent — like yam, okra, palm and platain — started to be cultivated successfully in the diaspora. (Carney and Rosomoff 2009). West African populations already had a long history of coexistence with and domestication of such species such as cattle (introduced from Eastern Sahara between 8000 and 6000 B.C.E.), and the endemic donkey and guinea fowl (the latter being domesticated much later, around the 1st millennium B.C.E), but also due to the introduction of sheep, goats and zebu amongst others, which increased the diversification of livestock in pastoralist societies (*idem* 11-15). However, as it has been noted by many authors in the field of archaeology, ethnology and natural sciences, the provision of food and animal products may not be the only or even the primary reason for the domestication of animals. Akishinomiya (2009, 24-25) argues that chickens were not domesticated only with the intention of making them a reliable source of food. Studies in South-East Asia hint at cockfighting, divination practices, symbolic and ornamental purposes as possible reasons

for the domestication of these birds. Therefore, the slaughtering and eating of animals could have developed as part of a much more complex and layered form of interaction between humans and animals.

An example of how pastoralist societies find in their livestock intimate companions is shown by Galaty (2014) in his work on the Maasai people. As he argues, cattle intersects with human society to such extent that the two parties become a metonym one for the other. This feature is highlighted at the moment of the sacrificial killing of an ox during the rite of passage of an age-group, where the ox is considered at the same time different enough to be sacrificed but similar enough to act as a symbol of cohesion within the group.

If animals were in some sense seen as occupying the opposite side of the nature/culture divide from people, the Maasai—among other pastoral peoples—see livestock as part of the domain of human sociality, not just as individuals but as persons, with some capacity for intersubjectivity, volition and reciprocal interaction with people. Animals are thus sign vehicles for our understanding of human nature, both because they are objects of intellectual apprehension and are also subjects of human fascination, experience, and emotion (*idem* 43).

Similarly, Marvin (1984, 61-65) noted how fighting cocks in Andalusia are regarded as to having and displaying characteristics that resonate with Andalusian constructions of masculinity. However, while men are not allowed to lose their control in a brutal way, the birds' exercise of aggressiveness during the fight is accepted and celebrated. In both examples, animals are at the same time compared with humans but also

regarded as different beings, subjected to different laws and charged with different expectations than humans.

Candomblé rituals require frequent interactions with different animal species, and most interactions, although not all, end with the ritual slaughter of the animal. During my fieldwork, I witnessed and participated in rituals involving chickens, guineafowls, doves, snails, goats, hares, ducks, canaries, and bullhead catfish. I had hints and direct information, although not direct experience, of the use of tortoises, snakes, pigs, oxen, sheep, while the use of dogs and cats was denied by my interlocutors. Indeed, in many terreiros I visited, cats, dogs and other pets roam freely and are taken care of by the community. The two Yorkshire terriers of Pai Odé always travel with him to the different terreiros he leads in São Paulo and to Italy, where he works and he has part of his religious and biological family. Similarly, five large dogs (four rotweillers and one crossed-breed), eight cats, four tortoises, and two canaries live in the Axé Ilé Oba of São Paulo, in the neighbourhood of Jabaquara. The dogs especially like to wander around and seek the attention of the sacred sons, the clients and the sympathisers of the terreiro. These animals appear to be used to the sounds of the drums, to the smells of the offerings and to the crowd of humans, orixás and entities dancing during the ceremonies. The same terreiro hosts, among many others, a painting of the orixá Ogum, portrayed while waving his sword and in the company of a dog (his votive animal), particularly a rotweiler. In fact the artist, Agnes do Santos, decided to depict Ogum together with the same dog breed present in the Candomblé house. The artwork, painted between the late 1990s and the



Painting of Ogum with a Rottweiler (Axé Ilê Obá, São Paulo)

©Giovanna Capponi

beginning of the 2000s, had been commissioned by the religious leader of that time, Mãe Sylvia of Oxalá, who instructed the artist to create a series of paintings for the terreiro. Indeed, the love for pets is often used to dismiss rumors insinuating that dogs are potential sacrificial victims in Candomblé rituals. Undeniably, dogs are widely used in sacrifices in the West African context (Barnes 1997, 130) for the deity called Ogun or Gù. However, the overlapping of the cultural understanding of dogs as pets and the traditional ritual practices created an interesting discourse around why dogs are not offered anymore in the New World. Candomblecists often argue that the type of dog offered to Ogunjá, a particular quality of Ogum also called *comedor de cachorros* (“dog eater”) was a wild species that cannot be found in Brazil and that has little in common with domestic dog breeds. Others admit that dogs used to be sacrificial victims but that this practice was banned, since these animals are considered pets in Brazil, and not a source

of protein. I will dwell more on the controversies concerning questions of edibility in the later chapters. For all these reasons, dogs shifted from being Ogun's favourite meal to being his favourite companion. However, there are always hints of dogs being potential sacrificial offerings for this orixá.

Sacred Father: (*joking and complaining that his sacred daughter wanted to bring her dog to the terreiro during the ceremonies*) If you bring the dog, I will give him to Ogum!

Sacred Mother. : No! You cannot say that! You don't "do" the dog for Ogum, come on! It is the animal he likes, but you don't give the dog to him.

Giovanna: But if the dog dies...

S.F.: No, it didn't die. Ogum got it.

Sacred son: A few days ago a dog came here to the country house, he was very ill [...] there was nothing left to do, it was such a grief... we gave it to Ogum.

In both speeches, it is clear that when a dog dies, it is not an accidental event, but a deliberate action of Ogum who gets the animal. Particularly in the second example, an ill and pain-suffering stray dog was "given" (not in the sense of sacrificing, but simply shooting it) to Ogum to put an end to its suffering. The sacred son showed grief and compassion but also a sense of inevitability, since the dog was going to be taken by the deity anyway.

A similar understanding of animal life and death emerges in the rituals involving hares, votive animals of Oxossi, in which the hare is not sacrificed but set free. I participated to such a ritual during preliminary research in 2009 in the Ilé Axé Alaketu Airá in northern Italy. However, the hare did not

leave the perimeter of the terreiro and continued living in the garden of the Candomblé house. After a few weeks, we discovered that the hare developed an eye infection due to contacts with herbicides; we tried to cure it but with no success. It was clear to everyone in the community that Oxossi finally had decided to take the hare for himself.

Poultry are often considered the protagonists of animal sacrifice in different African contexts (Turner 1977; Insoll 2010), as well as in Afro-Brazilian religious practices (Léo Neto, da Silva Mourão and Alves 2011). Their presence is very frequent both in the rituals and in the myths. In Pai Odé's account that I previously mentioned, chickens and guineafowls are associated to the spread and multiplication of Candomblé initiates, while Oxum, the orixá of fertility and maternity, is responsible for the process of initiation as well as for the creation of the guineafowl. In fact, during the initiation process, the paintings performed over the body of the novice recall the spotted feathers of the guineafowl. Moreover, among the most important *orín* ("sacred chants") sung in the same occasion, one is especially dedicated to Oxum.

The process of translating (and even transcribing) chants<sup>39</sup> is always controversial. Yoruba is considered the ritual language in Candomblé Ketu, but the linguistic variety that reached Brazil has certainly been subjected to losses, alteration and hybridisation with other African languages (Castro

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<sup>39</sup> Chants are divided in *cantigas* and *orín*: while *cantigas* are sung during public celebrations, *orín* are strictly connected to the rituals and cannot be reproduced outside the terreiro.

1981, 65). Indeed, even the word Candomblé is a term of Bantu origins meaning “to pray”, “to invoke the deities” (*ibid.* 60). Despite the fact that some similarities can be observed between the ritual language and modern Yoruba, the former has completely lost not only its colloquial use in Brazil, but also its complex phonetics. In fact, Yoruba is a tonal language and its tones have a fundamental semantic value. Therefore, the loss of the correct pronunciation among Brazilian Portuguese native speakers turned Candomblé Yoruba into a sort of creole that is solely functional to the performing of the rituals. As a result, nowadays it is impossible to recover the original meaning of the chants, which are always subjected to the personal interpretation of the religious authorities<sup>40</sup>. Regarding this particular *orín*, my interlocutors explained it as related to Oxum and to the body paint of the *yawó*. According to the myth, Oxum created the first guineafowl by painting it with white spots, but also by placing the *osuu* on its head. Here the guineafowl’s crest is associated with one of the most sacred symbols of the initiation, the *osuu*, a conic shaped artefact, made of different ingredients and placed on the top of the head of the novice during the initiation (Vogel et al 1993, 105).

Poultry are present also in one of the most famous creation myths, where Olodumare gave to Oxalá the task of creating the world. To do so, he gave him the so called *saco da existência* (bag of existence), containing different ingredients that were necessary to this enterprise. Again, the composition of

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<sup>40</sup> As Capone (2010, 234) observes, in the last decades many Candomblé authorities started attending courses of Yoruba language as a way of legitimising and reinforcing their ties with their religious ancestral roots.

ingredients vary in the different versions of the same myth. Juana Elbein dos Santos (2002, 61) recounts a very complicated version in which the task is first given to Oxalá but afterwards taken over by Oduduwa. In this account, the bag of existence contains a handful of soil, five chickens with five toes in each foot, five doves and one chameleon. Oduduwa dropped the handful of soil and sent the doves to spread it, but they were very slow. She therefore sent the chickens that easily scratched the soil and spread it in all directions. Finally she sent the chameleon that stepped carefully on the newly formed earth to verify its steadiness.

Reginaldo Prandi, in his collection of myths (2001, 502), translates and reports another version of the myth already mentioned in Geoffrey Parrinder's *African Mythology* (1996, 21-22). In this narration, Oxalá is given a shell containing soil, then a chicken and a dove. When both birds scratched the soil and spread it, Olorum sent a chameleon to inspect the work of creation and to step on the earth. On that spot the city of Ifè was founded<sup>41</sup>. Comparing the two myths, it can be observed how the number of birds necessary to the process of creation decreases. In fact, as in a synecdoche, just one part is mentioned (a chicken, or a dove) to indicate multiple actors. Following this scheme, Vogel et al. report an entirely different version, recounted by a sacred father of Rio de Janeiro, in which the "chicken", more specifically a guineafowl, is the only animal that is responsible for the creation of the world. Vogel et al. (1993, 88) quote:

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<sup>41</sup> Ifè is a Nigerian city that Candomblecists often reconnect to the cult of Oxalá and that is present in different myths.



“The guineafowl is the one who made the earth. It was the first to exist.

It symbolised the earth — Oduduwa.

It symbolises the earth, and it is also the ground on which the *yawó* comes and goes.

There was little earth. It scratched and scratched...

And the ground increased. And the Earth was created.”<sup>42</sup>

Here the synecdoche turns into a metonym: the guineafowl becomes a symbol not only for the *yawó*, as it has been observed at the beginning of the chapter, but also for the earth and for Oduduwa, the deity who was in charge of creating the world. Vogel et al. (*ibid*, 88) report also an extended version of the same story where the dove and the chameleon also appear, but while the latter has the usual role of testing the steadiness of the ground, the dove is given the task to fly and deliver the message of the creation of the world to Olorum. Both anthropologists and Candomblecists contribute to the re-shaping of these myths, where different elements acquire new meanings and importance according to the setting and the context where the myth is told. In a similar vein, Peter Gow (2001) described the history and meaning of different versions of some Amazonian myths that he recorded among the Piro people of Perú. What the author unveils is that myths are often told as part of an historical narrative that does not neglect, and indeed

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<sup>42</sup> “A galinha-d’angola foi quem fez a terra. Foi a primeira a existir.

Ela simboliza a terra — *Oduduwa*.

Ela simboliza a terra, tanto que ela é o chão em que o *iaô* vem e vai embora.

Existia pouca terra. Ela ciscou, ciscou...

E o chão foi aumentando. E aí surgiu a Terra...”

includes, new and modern social actors. Moreover, the context and the details of these pieces of oral tradition are to be taken into consideration to rebuild an account of social change through the perspective of the indigenous people. Other important elements that emerge in myths are the relationships between certain animal species and humans, and the nature and perception of the lived world. These “audacious innovations”, as Lévi-Strauss (1976, 339) calls them, are meant to answer collective questions about a changing world. This is why, with the help of anthropologists and historians (and their written records), the guineafowl became the sole protagonist of a myth that originally featured other types of birds in the collective effort of scratching and spreading the soil. My argument is that the key for the interpretation of this change lies in the guineafowl as a bird whose African origins are recognised by the sciences as well as by popular culture. By stressing the invaluable presence of guineafowls in rituals and myths, candomblecists reinforce and reclaim the authenticity of their practice and the connections with an African history. For this reason, the guineafowl becomes so intrinsically connected not only to the creation of the Earth<sup>43</sup> but also to the creation of *yawós*, initiates, and living beings. While saying “it was the first to exist”, the narrator implies that specific animal to be the first creature to have been alive, and therefore a sort of ultimate ancestor and progenitor. In addition, the guineafowl is considered

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43 The idea of a round Earth has been presented to me in Candomblé by a sacred mother who, while explaining to me how to prepare rice balls as food offerings, told me that their round shape represented the world, the Earth. Indeed, myths are not the only fertile ground for “audacious inventions”, but symbols employed in rituals are also interesting examples of how meanings change and shift according to the context.

to be an *animal feito*, a bird that has been made, initiated, built just like the *yawó*.

Another myth that justifies the importance of the guineafowl as a symbol of life is the one in which Oxalá paints the white spots on the bird's feathers. According to the story, Death was threatening a city. In order to scare Death away, Oxalá took a black fowl and painted it with white spots, then he set it free in the middle of the market. When Death saw the guineafowl, he became scared and ran away (Vogel et al. 1993, 63). In the process of painting the symbols of the guineafowl on the body of the *yawó* during the initiation process, "life" is reinforced by "scaring the death away". This bird is, therefore, a symbol of life not only by being associated with the creation of the world and its inhabitants, but also for representing the abnegation of death. Candomblé *mães* and *pais de santo* do not only rely on the complex corpus of myth already described, but also on the direct observation of animal behaviour, sometimes also connected to the popular and traditional discourse around different species.

Pai Odé: Yes, our cult, the cult of the orixás, is a symbolic cult, where everything has its symbology. Even water, soil, leaves, trees and animals, every animal represents something. The dove represents balance, stability. The chicken represents abundance. The guineafowl represents strength, and you can see... you can observe the behaviour of each animal, it has a different behaviour. Each one conducts itself in a different way. The dove flies, it flies and represents harmony, the balance of the two wings... the chicken which scratches the ground the most, which is the most widespread one, it gets every sort of food from the ground. And the guineafowl, it is much more active, much

more majestic, it imposes itself, it is the strongest... for its posture, its impertinence, its physical shape...

Giovanna: It is big, isn't it?

P. O.: It is big, majestic, it represents strength.

G.: And what about its colour?

P.O.: Its colour is well-defined. Even its meat has a different strength than the others. It is thicker, stronger, darker. So it is a chicken that does not accept to be produced or reproduced artificially. It is not one of those chickens... nowadays the chickens of the slaughterhouse, the chickens... that are raised for the meat, they are chickens for high productivity, they are the product of an industrialised, mechanical process. But not the guineafowl, it does not develop itself mechanically.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Pai Odé: Sim, o nosso culto, o culto dos orixás, ele é o culto simbólico, aonde cada coisa tem uma simbologia. Desde a água, a terra, as folhas, das árvores aos animais, cada animal representa uma coisa. O pombo representa o equilíbrio, a estabilidade. A galinha comum ela representa a fartura. A galinha d'angola ela representa a força, e você pode ver... observar o comportamento de cada bicho tem um comportamento diferente. Cada um se envolve de uma maneira diferente. O pombo ele voa, ele voa e representa a harmonia, o equilíbrio de duas asas... a galinha que mais cisca, que é a galinha comum, ela retira da terra toda forma de alimento. E a galinha d'angola, ela é muito mais ativa, muito mais imponente, ela se impõe, ela é a mais forte... pela postura dela, a disinvoltura, na forma física dela.

Giovanna: É grandona, né?

P.O.: Ela é grande, ela é imponente, ela representa a força.

G: E a cor dela, né?

P.O.: A cor, ela é uma cor definida. Até a carne dela tem uma força diferente das outras. É mais consistente, mais forte, mais escura. Então é uma galinha que ela não aceita ser produzida ou reproduzida de maneira artificial. Não dá para ser uma galinha de... até hoje, a galinha para o abate, a galinha...de alimento, elas são galinhas de alta produção, elas são fruto de um processo industrializado, mecânico. A galinha d'angola não, ela não se desenvolve mecanicamente.

Pai Odé connects the symbolic values associated to chickens to their ability to reproduce quickly and to find food in the ground, while the guineafowl stands out for its untameability, its posture and the dark colour of its feathers and meat. The dove instead, is characterised by its ability to fly, symbolising harmony and balance. A similar conversation I had with Tata Kajalacy shows how the birds' capability to fly is a fundamental trait for the sacred father.

Tata Kajalacy: Yes, I just told you, it has been proven that it [the guineafowl] is the bird that flies at the highest, it flies higher than the dove. If normally raised [out of captivity] it flies very high. Between the *pintada* [spotted] and the white one there is a difference as well. The white one is the one that flies the highest... only an *angoleiro* [practitioner of Candomblé angola] is going to tell you this... it flies higher than the spotted guineafowl, because these are the secrets of nature.

Giovanna: The white one is the albino, isn't it?

T.K.: The albino flies the highest.

G.: Ah, I already saw it, it escaped, I saw it flying away.

T.K.: Eh, it is terrible...normally the animals that are sacrificed for Lemba [Oxalá in Candomblé Angola] are completely white for this reason, the white ones are more active and more gifted energetically... did I ever tell this thing to someone? No, not even for my sacred sons, I never told them... they do not deserve it! [laughters]

G.: And does the dove have another type of energy as well?

T.K.: The same type of energy, they fly high, the guineafowl, the dove and the duck in this sequence. First the guineafowl, then the dove, than the duck.

G.: Does the duck fly high? I did not know that!

T.K.: Very high, but not higher than the first two. You are going to “sing” a chicken and you are saying “I am going to kill a guineafowl, I am going to kill a dove”, we inform nature of what we are doing.<sup>45</sup>

Yá Paula, leader of the Axé Ilê Obá of São Paulo, expresses similar views when questioned about the meaning and the essence of the guineafowl.

Yá Paula: But when we have a very negative energy, the guineafowl pulls away all the negative energy... it is such a cool bird [...] I do not know its mystery, it is a very strong bird from an energetic point of view, it is very strong, very strong and wild, I think this is why it pulls away all the negative energy, because the energy does not stay in it, right? [...] It is very wild and agitated! The small ones not much, but the older ones they beak hard and they hurt, if you are not careful it

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<sup>45</sup> Tata Kajalacy: Sim, eu acabei de dizer, é provado que é aquela que voa mais alto, ela voa mais alto do que o pombo. Ela é criada normalmente na mata ela voa muito alto. E entre a pintada e a branca há uma diferença também. A branca que voa mais alto... só angoleiro vai te falar isso... ela voa mais alto que a pintada, porque são segredos da natureza.

Giovanna: Aquela branca seria aquela albina, né?

T.K.: A albina, voa mais alto.

G.: Ah, eu já vi, já fugiu, já vi ela fugir.

T.K.: Eh, é terrível... normalmente os bichos que são sacrificados para Lemba são todos brancos por causa disso, os brancos são mais ativos e mais dotados energeticamente... isso falei para alguém? Não, nem pro filho de terreiro, nunca falei... que eles não merecem!

(risadas)

G.: E o pombo tem outro tipo de energia também?

T.K.: A mesma energia, são aves que voam alto. A galinha de angola, o pombo e o pato, na sequência. Primeiro a galinha d'angola, depois o pombo, depois o pato.

G.: O pato também voa alto? Não sabia.

T.K.: Muito alto, mas não mais alto que esses dois. Vai cantando uma galinha e vai dizendo: “Eu vou matar uma galinha de angola, eu vou matar um pombo” a gente avisa a natureza do que está fazendo.

escapes, it is very nice [...]<sup>46</sup>

It is evident how the different religious authorities regard animals as having particular characteristics and agency by observing their behaviour in nature and by building a discourse around the species and their symbolic correspondent.

Arnaud Halloy, analysing Xangô (an Afro-Brazilian religion very similar to Candomblé, that gained popularity in Recife) rituals, through the lens of cognitive ethnography, takes into consideration the use of animal blood in ritual sacrifices as a form of “artefactualization”. As the author explains, the shrines of the *orixás* are *fed* and *alive* through the transfer of vivifying properties from certain leaves, food items and ingredients to the *assentamento* itself. The peculiar manipulation of material substances makes *objects* to become alive while also objectifying *living beings*.

We think it is precisely what happens with *otãs* and *ferramentas* [parts of the *assentamento*]. On the one hand, sacrificial animals are manipulated as mere artifacts *as* they are being categorized as members of a functional class. What is of interest about them is their very materiality: their blood as the main vehicle of *axé*, and their organs as the main ingredients in offering to *orixás*. Such a process of ‘artefactualization’ is also true for the initiate himself who is enclosed

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<sup>46</sup> Yá Paula: Mas quando a gente está com uma energia negativa muito forte, a galinha de angola ela puxa toda a energia negativa... ela é um bicho muito legal... eu não sei o mistério que tem a galinha de angola, ele é um bicho muito forte energeticamente, ele é um bicho muito forte, muito forte, e arisco, eu acho por isso que ela tira toda energia, que a energia não fica nela, né? Ela é muito arisca, agitada! As menorzinhas nem tanto, mas as mais velhas elas bicam mesmo e doído, se você não toma cuidado ela foge, é muito legal...

in the same ontological dynamic. As a matter of fact, it is as if the initiate was reduced to pure corporeity during ritual activity, and even more radically during episodes of possession. As Xangô members say, he becomes mere ‘material’ (*materia*) for the orixá to ‘incorporate’. On the other hand, some objects (*otãs, ferramentas*) are manipulated with caution, not because they are breakable, but as if they had embedded within them an ‘essential quality’, which is the constitutive quality of living kinds. “*Otãs are the orixás*”, as Xangô members say (Halloy and Whatelet 2013, 233).

The authors’ analysis certainly has its validity and some of its features are largely shared in the current academic debate, however, I must disagree on a few points. I observed a certain level of “artefactualization” of the initiates during the initiation process. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the body of the novice is treated like his/her *assentamento* and sacrifices and offerings are performed on his/her head to create a tie with the orixá. I also explained how the *assentamento* is one of the “material bodies” of the orixás, as is the novice’s body during trance possession. However, I do not think that the value of sacrificial animals lies solely in their materiality. Sacrificial chickens do not go through a process of “artefactualization” and reification more than the chickens slaughtered for food by their keepers in non-ritual contexts. The killing and the use of animal blood and body parts do not merely reduce the sacrificial animals to material form. In fact, it can be noted how the interaction between candomblecists and animals is far more complex than the relationship with the other “ingredients” that compose the ritual recipes, like banana leaves or maize flour. The individuality of the animal is normally taken into consideration and some of



the chantings address the animal directly, as it will be shown in detail in the following chapters. The use of animals as sacrificial victims does not derive from the qualities of the animals when they are alive and from the observation of their actions. The use of the blood, the feathers and the organs as “ingredients” for the rituals only makes sense because of the interaction chickens, doves and guineafowls intertwine with humans in myths, accounts and everyday life.

## **2.6 Pots and Heads: kinship, myth and ritual**

Candomblé worldview draws particular attention to the personal traits and characteristics of its participants. The essential symbol of this sacred individuality is the *ori* - the head. The head is not only the centre of one's existence, but also the epitome of one's uniqueness. The mythology ascribes the origins of human diversity to Ajalá, a potter who is in charge of making human heads with clay. Just as each handmade piece of pottery is unique, each human head presents its particularities. However, Ajalá is also described as an inattentive man with a bad drinking habit, which makes him responsible for the defects, flaws and imperfections of human individualities. The myth narrates how three characters had to go to the potter's workshop and choose their heads before they were born in the *aiyé* (the earth). Two of them went there, chose two beautiful heads and left. However, their heads were not suitable to live on the earth, and they caused problems and misfortunes to their owners. The third was the son of Orunmilá, the orixá of divination, who gave him instructions to bring along one thousand cowries. The son of Orunmilá visited the potter's workshop

and found an old woman who was waiting for Ajalá to claim back a debt of one thousand cowries he had borrowed from her. As the son of Orunmilá gave the cowries to the old woman, she showed to him how to choose a proper head that could help him succeed in life.

This story shows how one's *ori* is not only the essence of one's personality, but also the source of one's troubles or prosperity. As the sacred mother of Arborio told me once "All the problems come from the head"<sup>47</sup>.

This conception justifies once again the notion of one's head being "made" during the initiation process. The making of the head also implies that the novice's head is to be donated or dedicated to a specific orixá. It is interesting to see how, once this bond has been created, the relationship between humans and deities is understood in terms of kinship, as the person will be recognised as son or daughter of the orixá, and will absorb certain characteristics of the corresponding deity. The orixá is considered at the same time a father/mother and a *sacred alter ego*, an invisible double that lives in the *orun*, the world of spirits. However, the original meaning of the word *yawó* (indicating a the junior initiate who receives the orixá through trance possession) is a Yoruba term for "bride", "spouse", unveiling another level of kinship to the relationship.

As Bastian (1997) explained, anthropological studies often inscribe spirit-human relationships into a few simplistic categories like possession, mediumship and shamanism. However, some case studies show there are other ways to interface with the supernatural world, for example kinship, marriage or negotiation. Bastian examines, for instance, the case of the

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47 "Tutti i problemi vengono dalla testa"

*ogbanje* among the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria. An *ogbanje*, also known as *abiku* in the Yoruba world, is a human who develops stronger ties with the spirits than with his/her kin on earth. Due to this characteristic, he/she is likely to die young or to be haunted by his/her spirit companions in order to be persuaded to come back to the spirit world.

Human diversity is valued through different dynamics of self-representation, but also informal conversations and gossip, in Candomblé terreiros. Personal attitudes and behaviours, are often justified by one's sense of connection to a specific orixá. In many of the informal conversations that I witnessed during my fieldwork, human diversity is constantly compared with the great variety that can be found in the natural landscape. This aspect is also meant to influence the way people relate to one another, and can also bring conflicts and contrasts to emerge. However, conflicting diversity is more valuable than a homogenous environment, since, as a sacred mother told me once, "the Candomblé house needs all types of energies".

For example, I happened to participate in the rituals dedicated to the orixás Xangó, Ayrá, Yansá and Obá in the *terreiro* of Arborio, whose domains are volcanos, fire and storms. The week of the celebration was full of unforeseen circumstances that created problems and difficulties among the participants. Some pipes broke in the kitchen and in the bathroom, therefore access to water was limited. While some of the initiates yelled and ran around to make sure the rituals were performed, others were visibly exhausted by the situation. A daughter of Yemanjá, the goddess of the oceans - urged me to notice that those who were better adjusted to the

situation were sons and daughters of firey orixás, while the others were finding it very stressful. She said: “We are water, and now the fire is the one who is eating!”<sup>48</sup> The Candomblecist explains that sons and daughters of *water* orixás were feeling uncomfortable in that situation because “fire” was the protagonist of those particular rituals. Similarly, Thais, daughter of Obá, another firey orixá, once expressed to me the sense of irritation she felt whenever she participated to the rituals of initiation of a daughter of Oxum (Oba’s arch-enemy in the mythology): “It is not about them... it is just an energy that makes me impatient!”.

Georges Balandier (1993, 25-30) observed how rites often work as re-enactment of the myth. In fact, myths have the function of putting the world in order and rites serve the purpose of re-establishing this same structure through periodically staging the core narrative elements of the myth. In Candomblé *terreiros* the myths are not only re-established during the rites, they are also embodied in the ways in which Candomblecists relate to themselves and the others. Myths are not only present in codified actions and practices but in emotions, feelings and perceptions of the self. For this reason, in the previously mentioned ethnographic examples, senses of irritation, impatience and exhaustion immediately trigger an imaginative association between the lived situation and the mythical narratives of one’s personal orixá.

Indeed, not only Candomblecists, but also orixás, when they manifest in trance possession, re-enact the mythical relations they entertain one with the other. For instance, as I was participating in a sacrificial ritual in the *terreiro*

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48 “Noi siamo acqua, e adesso sta mangiando il fuoco.”

of Pai Odé, all the present *yawós* entered into trance, and the orixás were guided into another room. Only one orixá, an Oxalá who was too old and weak to sit up, remained on the floor. Realizing that, an Airá came back, lifted Oxalá and carried him upon his shoulders to the other room. This behaviour was justified by the fact that, according to a myth, Airá accompanied Oxalá on a journey from a city to another, and carried him upon his shoulders. A similar thing took place during a celebration at the Axéloiá of Salvador, Bahia, as the orixás Oxum and Logunedé, respectively mother and son in the mythology, were dancing in the *roda*. At some point, Oxum sat with her hip on the floor and Logunedé laid in the act of resting with his head on the mother's lap. The two orixás remained in that position for a few seconds, in the act of displaying the maternal tie of Oxum to her son. In both cases, each couple of orixás staged a myth and reiterated what in Candomblé terms is called *fundamento*: the fundamental and often secret particularities which reveal the relationship between the two characters. From these codified behaviours it is possible to detect the special loyalty which ties Airá to Oxalá, and also the filial care and affection between Oxum and Logunedé. As it has been observed, human and deities reiterate the myth not only through codified ritual behaviours and symbols, but also through emotions and feelings. These examples show how Candomblecists internalise the myths and express them in the ways they relate with each other.

### 3. The anthropologist and the Candomblé actors

*Fieldwork notes:*

*10/01/2016 - Caraguatatuba (São Paulo)*

*[I am at Tata Kajalacy's house, not far from Caraguatatuba, together with Janaina (Tata Kajalacy's biological daughter) and our friend Carlos. We are all sitting around the kitchen table and Janaina's mother is serving us coffee. Both Janaina and Carlos are anthropologists. Tata Kajalacy knows very well how these kind of interviews work and he lets me record the conversation with my telephone.]*

*Tata Kajalacy: Not even my biological daughter has ever heard what I am saying now... because recently, since I am old, it is because of her that I am making an exception and opening up. I would have never told these things to someone like you, who is not even initiated. I was very rigorous. It is because of her that I am opening up. And it is because I am a Candomblecist of Candomblé Angola and I know that my life is coming to an end, it is natural. And someone has to say what I did my whole life, who knows if you are that person. [...] But this is it. Speak up, ask me more questions!<sup>49</sup>*

#### 3.1 From Arborio to Bahia

I first started conducting research in the Ilê Axé Alaketu Airá in 2008 as part of my BA dissertation project. Since then I continued to have regular contact with Pai Mauro, the founder of the *terreiro*, and his *egbé* (religious family, community). The peculiarity of Pai Mauro's story deserves to be described

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<sup>49</sup> Tata Kajalacy: Nem a minha filha biológica nunca tinha escutado o que eu estou falando... porque ultimamente como estou velho é por conta dela que eu estou abrindo essa exceção. Jamais eu iria falar isso para alguém que nem é iniciado como você. Eu era muito rigoroso. Por conta dela que estou abrindo. E porque também eu sou do candomblé angola e sei que a minha vida está se acabando, é natural. E alguém tem que dizer o que eu fiz na vida inteira, quem sabe você é uma. [...] Mas é isso. Fala, pergunte mais!

in more detail. He was born in Milan at the end of the 1960s in a Waldensian family (a Christian minority especially present in the North-Western regions of Italy). He is the nephew of a cartomancer who was running a famous show on a local TV channel, and who introduced him to the world of fortune telling early on in his life. At the age of seventeen, Mauro started to work together with his aunt, gaining popularity in the same field. According to his accounts, this activity was very profitable, and he often highlights the high-quality life he was leading and the specific skills he gained practicing card reading, pendulum dowsing and other fortune telling tools. Moreover, Mauro and his aunt's clients were also willing to pay for specific rituals that would help solving their problems. While the aunt was practicing rituals somehow connected to Brazilian Umbanda, Mauro was initially more attracted by Solomonic magic. However, during a trip to Brazil, he started to develop an interest in Afro-Brazilian magico-religious practices. He then contacted a sacred father from Recife, in the north-east of Brazil, and decided to get some help to set up a specific space to perform Afro-Brazilian rituals in Milan. By his own admission, Mauro's actions were moved solely by his professional interests until that moment. However, while performing some rituals in the new space, an unexpected event started to undermine his utilitarian perspective.

Pai Mauro: As I was saying, after having been to Recife and after having opened a space with the help of someone who came from Brazil on purpose, something happened which let me very perplexed. For all my life I tried to have an almost absolute control over myself, my emotions, my body, my mind. Which is a very important thing to do when you operate with

energies, with things that... need to stay there and must not invade your personal space. But when this person came from Brasil to help... a particular, strange energy, which I did not know, which I did not understand, took possession of my body instead. It made me say and do strange things [...] I did not know how to speak Portuguese at the time, but this energy which took possession of my body spoke in Portuguese.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, Mauro unexpectedly became the protagonist in a case of spirit possession and speaking-in-tongues that brought him to reflect upon his personal and spiritual involvement. After a few months, his doubts were cleared by his encounter with another *pai de santo* from São Paulo, Pai Taunderán, whom he met in Milan at a Latin-American festival. The “Festival Latinoamericando” is a themed festival that takes place every year during the whole summer in Assago (Milan). Besides being a venue for various concerts of Latin-American music and dancing nights, the festival hosts a fair with different stands selling theme-related street food or artisanal objects. In the late 1990s, Pai Taunderán started working at the festival running his own stall, where he was selling Brazilian artisanal items,

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<sup>50</sup> Pai Mauro: Stavo dicendo, dopo essere stato a Recife, dopo avere aperto uno spazio con l'aiuto di questa persona venuta appositamente dal Brasile, è successa una cosa che mi ha lasciato molto perplesso, ovvero, ripeto, per tutta la vita ho cercato di avere un controllo pressoché assoluto sulla mia persona, sulle mie emozioni, sul mio corpo, sulla mia mente. Cosa per altro importantissima quando operi con delle energie, con delle cose che..devono mantenersi tali e non invadere il tuo spazio personale. E invece un'energia particolare, strana, che non conoscevo, che non... che non capivo, mentre questa signora venuta appositamente dal Brasile era in Italia, quest'energia ha preso possesso del mio corpo. Facendomi dire, fare cose strane. [...] Io allora non parlavo ancora portoghese, eppure questa energia che aveva preso possesso del mio corpo parlava portoghese.



amulets and statues related to the world of the orixás and he was also performing *jogo de búzios* (cowrie shells divination) for clients and attendees. The *jogo de búzios* is very common in Brazil in the same way that tarot reading is popular in many European countries. The clients who require these types of services do not necessarily have an interest in the religious background of Candomblé or Umbanda, but they will trust and pay those who can perform the rituals in order to analyse and solve personal problems concerning their love life, their financial situation or their spiritual and physical wellbeing. However, for the duration of my fieldwork the Latin-American festival of Assago has been often mentioned as a “place of recruitment” of potential habitué clients, sympathisers and also initiates.

Indeed, Mauro’s *jogo de búzios* reveals that his destiny was to become a Candomblé sacred father, therefore he decided to follow Pai Taunderán to São Paulo and to undergo the initiation rituals. He became dedicated to the orixá Airá and from that moment he embraced Candomblé religion beyond his professional interests. However, he already had a faithful clientele waiting to be served, therefore he started working regularly with Pai Taunderán and his partner Pai Odé, another sacred father from São Paulo. This collaboration allowed Mauro to learn new ways of operating, speeding up his path to become a *pai de santo*, while Pai Taunderán and Pai Odé benefited from the remuneration and prestige of having clients outside the Brazilian borders. Meanwhile, Pai Mauro divorced his first wife and married Pai Odé’s biological sister, who moved to Italy together with her two children as they decide to set up a Candomblé *terreiro*. In Pai Mauro’s detailed account, the process of looking for a suitable house for his purpose



Ilê Axé Alaketu Aira, Arborio (Italy) ©Giovanna Capponi

was full of coincidences, strange circumstances and unforeseen situations which led him to find the farmstead of Arborio where the *terreiro* is now located. During the interview, Pai Mauro's narrative always contained a central message suggesting that the will and the presence of the orixás manipulated the events and guided his choices.

After a few years in the mid-2000s, Pai Taunderán left the Candomblé house of Arborio. In fact, his romantic relationship with Pai Odé came to an end and, coincidentally, also the relationship with his sacred son Pai Mauro became sour. For these reasons, Pai Mauro elected Pai Odé as his new *pai de santo* and point of reference in the Candomblé social and hierarchical structure. Consequently, Pai Odé became one of the most important contacts for my fieldwork in Brazil because he invited me to participate to the rituals and celebrations taking place in his Candomblé house in São Paulo. Pai Odé runs two Candomblé houses: one set in the urban area of São Paulo, in the

neighbourhood of Ipiranga, and another one in a forested area not far from Juquitiba, situated approximately 75 km from São Paulo.

Pai Odé: I am 55 years old, so this space [*talking about the Candomblé house in Ipiranga*] has belonged to the orixás for 60 or 50 something years. And here it used to be different [...] very different, we used to have a lot of forested and green spaces, rivers, land, water around here.

Giovanna: Really?

P.O.: Here, here! And there was forest, water, river, everything we needed. When we had to perform an *obrigação* [*Candomblé rite of passage*], we used to walk over there, we used to cross the high road and here we used to find leaves, trees, water, land. Just like we have over there [*in Juquitiba*], basically the same thing. But then the progress came, isn't it true? It came and took control, the concrete jungle dominated [...] I had to come up with an alternative solution, I had to find a space which could serve to the cult of the orixás in the best and most appropriate way. There are many different things nowadays, we already said that we have to adapt, if I had to do a *bori*<sup>51</sup> for you here today, it would be very different from the one I would do there. Not because of the basis, the ritual, but because of the material I would use, because of how I would feel... because there [*in the rural terreiro*] I get water from the spring, here [*in the urban terreiro*] I get water from the tap, here it is a processed water, while over there it is pure. Here I take a leaf from a pot plant, while there I will take directly from the forest, there I would let your *bori* sit for half an hour and then I would deliver it directly in the river. Here the *bori* would stay one, two days depending on when can we have time

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<sup>51</sup> A *bori* is a ritual that is performed to “feed” the *ori*, the head of a person, and it is normally used to create the conditions of balance and stability in someone’s thinking, but also as a form of preparation for the person to undergo other rituals.

to go and reach a river, so there would be a delay. See how... the ritual process becomes different<sup>52</sup>.

As explained by his own words, there is a practical reason for the sacred father to run two Candomblé houses. In fact, as the Ipiranga neighbourhood underwent urban development and the landscape changed, Pai Odé decided to find another place closer to the natural elements. This would allow the rituals to be performed more easily but also for them to be “purer” and their effect to be stronger and more immediate. Indeed many *terreiros*, now situated in urban environments, were initially founded in forested and unoccupied peripheries. However, Pai Odé’s urban sacred space remains a convenient place to receive his clients, who can now have the shells read

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<sup>52</sup> Eu tenho 55 anos, então já são 60 anos, 50 e pouco anos, que esse espaço já é do orixá. Nunca foi nada que não seja do orixá. E a realidade aqui [...] era outra, a gente tinha muito mato, muito verde, rio, terra, água.

G. Sérico?

P.O.: Aqui, aqui. E tinha mato, tinha água, tinha rio, tinha tudo o que a gente precisava. A gente fazia uma obrigação, andava ali, atravessava aqui a avenida, a gente encontrava aqui folha, árvore, água, terra. Como a gente tem lá, praticamente a mesma coisa. Só que o progresso chegou, né? Chegou e tomou conta, a selva de pedras dominou. [...] tive que pensar numa outra alternativa, de achar um espaço que pudesse desenvolver o culto ao orixá da maneira mais próxima possível a o que deve ser. Existe muita diferença hoje, a gente falou que tem que se adaptar, hoje se eu for fazer um bori para você aqui, ele vai ser diferente daquele que eu vou fazer lá. Não na base, não no ritual, mas naquilo que vou usar, de como vou perceber... porque lá eu pego a água da fonte, aqui vou pegar a água da torneira, aqui é tratada, lá é uma água pura. Aqui eu vou pegar uma folha que vem no vaso, lá eu pego direto da floresta, lá vou levantar seu bori, deixa descansar já meia hora vou entregar na água. Aqui o bori fica um dia, dois dias, dependendo a disponibilidade de ir até a água, então vai num atraso. Olha como... o desenvolvimento do ritual se torna diferente.



“The concrete jungle” (São Paulo) ©Giovanna Capponi

and other rituals performed for them (like the aforementioned *borí*) without having to leave the city.

Most of the Candomblé ceremonies I attended under Pai Odé’s guidance between October 2015 and January 2016 were held in the *terreiro* of Jquitiba, where I was allowed a deeper level of participation because of my involvement in Pai Mauro’s Candomblé house.

Pai Odé’s trajectory in the religion started in the Candomblé Angola, but then, as it often happens, he switched to Candomblé Ketu, regarded as a more prestigious and less syncretic and consequently “more African” Candomblé nation (for a deeper analysis of this common shift from Angola to Ketu see Capone 2010). In the attempt of tracking back his sacred genealogy, I also visited his sacred father, Pai Kabila (Wladimir de Carvalho) and his *terreiro* in the municipality of Barueri, (São Paulo). I

participated in a public celebration dedicated to the orixás Oxum, Yemanjá and Logunedé, which unfortunately was the last celebration of the calendar. Due to lack of time, I found it impossible to reschedule a longer visit to Pai Kabila's Candomblé house. However, I had the opportunity to travel to Salvador, Bahia, and to visit the House of Oxumaré (*Casa de Oxumaré*), one of the most ancient and renowned Candomblé houses of the country, where Pai Kabila was initiated by Mãe Nilzete de Yemanjá in 1988. Thanks to the guidance of Pai Odé, who maintains regular contacts with the House of Oxumaré, I managed to meet the current religious leader Pai Pece de Oxumaré (Silvanilton da Encarnação da Mata) and to interview one of his trusted helpers and sacred son, Leandro Dias Encarnação da Mata, who holds the title of Baba Egbé, a religious status given to the person who acts as a point of reference for the whole community. My brief visits to these *terreiros* helped me to better understand the constant processes of adaptation



Axé Oxumaré (Salvador, Bahia). ©Giovanna Capponi



and renegotiations that Candomblecists experience in different settings. Tracing back the network and the sacred family from Arborio to Salvador sheds light on the complex ways in which a ritual can be reshaped from the rural to the urban environment, from the most traditional background of Bahia to the modern metropolis of São Paulo and from the coasts of Brazil to the Italian villages of Piedmont.

### **3.2 “Exú made our paths cross”**

Despite my specific interest in following Pai Mauro’s network in São Paulo and Bahia, Pai Odé and his extended family were not the only contacts to whom I owe the results of my fieldwork. In fact, while privileging the ceremonies led by Pai Odé, I was also committed to develop contacts with other *terreiros* whenever possible, in order to get a better grasp of how diverse and complex the universe of Candomblé is. As it often happens during fieldwork in social anthropology, my structured research plan has been undermined but also enriched by chance encounters with initiates, scholars, activists and lawyers who introduced me to their personal web of relationships and became interesting interlocutors, precious helpers and in some cases even good friends.

One of the Candomblé houses I had the opportunity to know and attend frequently is the Axé Ilê Oba situated in Jabaquara, a district in the south central area of São Paulo. This particular *terreiro* is one of the largest of São Paulo and was proclaimed as cultural and historical heritage by the Brazilian institution CONDEPHAAT in 1990. Led by Mãe Sylvia of Oxalá from 1986 to 2014, the *terreiro* is currently guided by her daughter Yá Paula of Yansá,

who took the lead in 2015 at the young age of twenty-seven years old. Many anthropologists contributed with their studies to the acknowledgement and affirmation of the Axé Ilé Obá as one of the most important Candomblé houses of São Paulo, especially when Mãe Sylvia of Oxalá was still heading it. For this reason, Yá Paula welcomed my interest and allowed me to interview her and to spend time in her *terreiro* whenever rituals and important events were performed. In addition to Candomblé rituals, the Axé Ilé Obá also hosts Umbanda *giras* once a week, proving that the two religious backgrounds often overlap. In fact, some of the initiates of the *terreiro* also cultivate an interest and a devotion for the *entities* of Umbanda. Every week *gira* is dedicated to a different set of entities, normally *Exús*, *Caboclos*, or *Preto Velhos*. For me attending the Umbanda sessions was a fruitful way of getting to know the Candomblé house and its devotees, frequenters and sympathisers.

Another Candomblé *terreiro* I attended mostly because of its popular Umbanda sessions was the one of Pai Dessemi, located in the centre of São Paulo, in the neighbourhood of Santa Cecília. Pai Dessemi's house, which one of the sacred sons defined as a Candomblé house "with Pai Dessemi's own rules", is a perfect example of how fluid the distinction between Umbanda and Candomblé is. Indeed, while the Axé Ilé Obá maintains all the characteristics that anthropologists would associate to a traditional Candomblé sacred space, Pai Dessemi's *terreiro* shows signs of the syncretism typical of Umbanda, both in the aesthetics and in the spatial organisation. Its popularity and accessibility, due to its central location, made it a privileged spot for observing how Umbanda sessions appeal not



only to faithful devotees but also to a wider public of occasional frequenters, local residents and young people coming from São Paulo's underground subcultures.

There are other two *terreiros* I briefly visited during my fieldwork but whose sacred fathers were extremely helpful to my research. One is the Egbé Ireo led by Pai Daniel of Ogum (Daniel Gonzaga), located in Diadema, in the ABC region in Greater São Paulo. Pai Daniel is a policeman and capoeira teacher, and his *terreiro* maintains the heritage and the rigour of the famous Casa Branca of Salvador, Bahia. Because of his well-read and charismatic manners, he managed to gather around his religious community many of his capoeira trainees and some curious scholars of different fields.

A completely different setting is the Ilé N'Zambi led by Tata Kajalacy (Ataualpa de Figueiredo Neto), a Candomblé house founded in the 1980s and located in Caraguatatuba, on the northern coast of the state of São Paulo. Tata Kajalacy is used to the methods and interviews of anthropologists, as his own biological daughter Janaina is one of them, and she studied Candomblé Angola/Bantu in her father's *terreiro* for her Ph.D. research project. Despite his French ancestry and his blue eyes, Tata Kajalacy, devoted his lifetime to the valorisation of Afro-Bantu heritage in Candomblé and helped me understanding the differences and similarities between different Candomblé traditions.

During my brief trip to Salvador I also visited and had contacts with the Ilé Axé Opo Afonjá (another traditional and famous *terreiro*) led by Mãe Stella de Oxossi, and the Axéloiá, a Candomblé house led by the anthropologist Júlio Braga who has now resigned from his academic life to dedicate

himself to his role of *pai de santo*. Moreover, I had the opportunity to visit the Eran Opè Oluô, known as Terreiro Viva Deus, founded by Zé do Vapor in the municipality of Cachoeira, in the Recôncavo Baiano, which is famous for its high density of *terreiros* in the area.

Despite my initial plans of focusing on Candomblé, I soon realised that most Candomblé ceremonies take place during the weekends. In fact, public *festas* last many hours and *terreiros* are often located in isolated places that are difficult to reach. For this reason, I decided to use the rest of my time to attend Umbanda sessions that are usually held during the weekdays in *terreiros* or spiritualist Centres located within the urban area. Among those, I mention the Casa do Pai Benedito de Aruanda led by Pai Ronaldo Linares and Baba Dirce in São Caetano do Sul (ABC region of Greater São Paulo), the Primado do Brasil in the neighbourhood of Tatuapé in São Paulo led by Mãe Maria Aparecida Nalessio, the Abaça Inhansã e Oxossi led by Mãe Oiá Ice (sacred mother of the already mentioned Tata Kajalacy), the Tenda de Umbanda de Pai Tomás e Mamãe Oxum led by Dona Silene and located in Itapequerica da Serra (Metropolitan region of São Paulo) and the Terreiro Estrela da Guia led by Mãe Gilda Prazeres da Silva, located in the neighbourhood of Tucuruvi, in São Paulo.

Not all the contacts I had with initiates, sacred fathers and sacred mothers happened in *terreiros*. In fact, due to a recent rise in discrimination cases against Afro-Brazilian religions, activist groups started gathering and organising cultural events and legal actions in order to defend the image of

Afro-Brazilian religions. Attending these events and having contacts with its main actors helped me understanding the controversies and the impact of animal sacrifices and other Candomblé practices in a country with harsh problems of inequality, racism and stigmatisation of the lower classes and its symbols.

I started acquiring my information attending the ECOBANTU day, a cultural event focusing on Bantu derived culture in Brazil. I then came in contact with some of the members of the *Ação pelo Direito de Resposta* (Action for the Right of Reply), an group organising legal action against Rede Record, an Evangelical television channel which delivered a derogatory image of Afro-Brazilian cults in one of its programmes on air. By attending the meetings of such groups and other educational events (like the “Black Awareness Day”, celebrated nationwide on the 20th of November, and the Caboclo festival), I managed to meet and interview activists and well-known people such as Dr Hédio Silva Jr. (former Secretary of Justice of the State of São Paulo) who specialised in cases of religious discrimination and Pai Cássio Ribeiro, an Umbanda sacred father very active in the area of Diadema, a municipality in the ABC region of São Paulo.

Most of these encounters were not planned or expected in terms of my initial idea of how my fieldwork would develop. However, getting to meet and talk to people from different backgrounds and perspectives in a limited timeframe gave me a general (although not always detailed) understanding of the problems and conflicts Afro-Brazilian religions and their followers

experience nowadays. As I will explain, focusing on animal sacrifice did not prevent me from including a wider analysis involving political and racial issues that emerged during my research. On the contrary, animal-related practices encouraged me to explore a comprehensive range of practices related to money, exchange, hierarchy and politics in Candomblé religion. Being aware of the complexity of the issue, I decided to let my fieldwork encounters guide me across this wide range of topics, following a red thread that proved to be revealing not only of the relationship humans develop with animals but also with other humans. As my fellow scholar, anthropologist, and initiate Patrício Carneiro Araújo (who introduced me to most of my research contacts) said after we had met — by absolute chance — in a small bar close to my apartment in São Paulo: “Exu [*the orixá of the crossroads*] did an excellent job when he made our paths cross!”.

### **3.3 Snakes and ladders: climbing and falling off the hierarchy in the *terreiros***

Candomblé *terreiros* are organised according to a rigid hierarchical structure that determines the nature of internal relationships among initiates. These extended families are built like a pyramid, at the head of which is the *pai de santo* or *mãe de santo*, also called *babalorixá* or *yalorixá* (literally: father/mother of the orixá, the person who is entitled to initiate others). The sacred father or mother, as in my personal translation, usually has many sacred sons and daughters who sustain and compose the religious family. Their status normally depends on their *idade de santo* (age in the saint, one’s years of experience within the religion) and the type of initiation they went

through. There are two possible types of initiation: the initiation of *yawó* (people who have the ability to go into trance) and initiation of *ogã/equede* (respectively for male or female people who do not have the ability to go into trance). The difference lies both in the roles these initiates have in the religious community and in their social mobility. In fact, *yawós* start their journey at the lowest level of the hierarchy, but they can, after at least 7 years (the age of majority in Candomblé), become sacred fathers and mothers themselves and initiate other people. Conversely, *ogãs* and *equedes* (pronounced “ekedji”) are admitted into the higher ranks soon after their entrance in the religion, but they will never reach the top. The ways in which these hierarchical statuses are shown lies in a list of behaviours that shape the etiquette inside the sacred space. *Yawós*, for the first 7 years after their initiation, cannot sit on chairs or eat with cutlery inside the *terreiro*, they must dance barefoot and they have to show respect to their elders in a number of ways. Due to their status of juniority, *yawós* can be usually seen sitting on straw mats, eating with their hands and performing tasks considered humble or unpleasant, such as cleaning the kitchen floor and plucking and eviscerating the sacrificial animals.

After 7 years and after going through a specific ritual of passage called *obrigação*, they become *egbomi*, elders, and they are permitted to sit on chairs, use forks and spoons, and they could be assigned a *cargo*, a specific role of responsibility within the community. Due to their fundamental role as “horses” of the orixás<sup>53</sup>, the initiation process of *yawós* is also longer and

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<sup>53</sup> This is a common metaphor used to describe trance possessions, where the deity is said to “ride” the body of the devotee.

more intense than that of people who do not experience trance possession. The novice is kept for a certain number of days (traditionally twenty-one, although the number has shrunk to seven in modern *terreiros*) in a room called *roncó* which represents a mother's womb. During this period of time, his/her head is shaved for the deity to be "fixed" on the top in order to create a physical tie, a channel through which the orixá will take possession of the person's body and the *assentamento* (the sacred receptacle where the orixá receives the offerings) is also created. On the last day, a public celebration is held to mark the re-birth of the novice and his/her official entrance into the sacred family<sup>54</sup>.

*Equedes*, instead, are women who do not go into trance, but have the role of helping and taking care of the orixá during the trance possession. This person is in charge of dressing the orixá with the appropriate garments and clothes, guiding him/her while dancing and similar functions. The *ogãs*, their masculine counterparts, are in charge of playing the drums (an activity that is forbidden to women in the sacred space) and slaughtering the animals during sacrificial practices. *Equedes* and *ogãs* go through a simplified and shorter initiation process, their heads are not shaved and they do not carry the symbols that are mythically connected to the guineafowl, such as the body paintings and the *osuu* (conically shaped artefact associated with the guineafowl crest).

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<sup>54</sup> As it can be observed, these elaborated sets of rituals reproduce the structure already described by Victor Turner (1991) in his works on rites of passage, starting with a phase of separation in which the novice is secluded, liminality, and eventually integration in the community with a new status.

Since they retain certain privileges in the hierarchy, their position and prestige is also different from *yawós*. For these reasons, important personalities, intellectuals and sometimes male anthropologists are likely to be initiated as *ogãns*. In this way they contribute to adding prestige to the Candomblé houses and they have access to information and services provided by the *terreiros* while also maintaining a comfortable hierarchical position. This is the case of the writer Jorge Amado, the dancer Augusto Omolú and the musician and former Minister of Culture Gilberto Gil, but also of the French anthropologists Pierre Verger and Roger Bastide, among many others. The Argentinian anthropologist Juana Elbein dos Santos was also an *equede* of the Axé Opô Afonjá in Salvador, and she was the first scholar to theorise the methodological validity of the initiation for researchers. As Capone (2010, 25) argues, men and women of letters, academics, doctors and people whose status is already high in society are often chosen as representatives of Candomblé religious communities, and some of them consider their roles within the *terreiros* as mere honorary titles. Moreover, *ogãns* and *equedes* also have the privilege of free and immediate access to the ritual secrets, which are only unveiled little-by-little to *yawós*. It should be noted that the fact of being initiated as *yawó* or *equede/ogã* is not a personal choice. It is normally determined through the cowrie shell divination together with the personal orixá to whom the person will be dedicated. However, there is a degree of negotiation in this respect. For example, a selected *ogã/equede* may be initiated as *yawó* in order to allow him/her to become a *pai* or *mãe de santo* in the future, and reaching a higher level of responsibility and prestige.

Although Candomblé is not explicitly proselytising, anthropologists and researchers soon realise that their presence in the *terreiro* automatically triggers a slow and subtle seduction game, where the outsider is gradually absorbed into the “native” universe. This movement towards some degree of integration is also a desirable trait for anthropologists, as verbalisation and interviews are never sufficient to understand rituals, and participation is necessary in a context where secrecy and hierarchy are part of the social norm. This process of immersion into the Candomblé world normally starts with the detection of one’s personal orixá. As soon as the outsider passes the threshold of the *terreiro*, the members of the community would start playfully guessing his/her *dono da cabeça* (“master of the head”) by asking questions, observing and making commentaries upon his/her clothes, appearance, personality traits and manners. These guesses are a first attempt to draw similarities between the mythical archetypes of the orixás and human characteristics, but they are also a way for the outsider to start familiarising and identifying with his/her potential personal deity. Once the *jogo de búzios* unveils the actual patron orixá, the person, even if non-initiated, would be encouraged through jokes, references and casual commentaries to comply with his/her new social and mythical identity. When, at the beginning of my fieldwork for my BA dissertation in 2008 in the *terreiro* in Arborio, my orixá had been initially identified as Oxum, the feminine goddess of love and fertility, I was encouraged to behave and appear accordingly. I was humourously reproached for not wearing make-up and for not displaying the typical traits of feminine beauty or vanity in the way I was dressed. Someone once joked with me by saying: “With your hair



in that state, you cannot be a daughter of Oxum, maybe you are a daughter of Logunedé!”. When eventually a decisive *jogo de búzios* confirmed that I was indeed a daughter of Logunedé, the deity who retains the feminine characteristics of his mother Oxum but also the masculine traits of his father Oxossi, the hunter god, I noticed the reaction of my interlocutors was one of surprise and relief, as finally the traits of my own personality and the ones of my patron orixá successfully overlapped. It is interesting to note that, in my Brazilian fieldwork, this game had different outcomes.

According to Pai Daniel, the reasons for Logunedé to be pointed out as my orixá were purely aesthetic: “They say you are [a daughter] of Logun because you are skinny, you look like a hunter!”<sup>55</sup>. Instead, more than once I had been identified, by those external to Pai Mauro’s network, as a daughter of Yemanjá, the goddess of the ocean.

There is a wide anthropological literature about Yemanjá and a comparable deity called Mami Wata in the West African context and in its diaspora: depicted as an exotic mermaid who came from abroad, she embodies, through her powers and her relationship with money and wealth, the spirit of a colonial past (Drewal 1988, Houlberg 1996). Despite the fact that West African collective memory of the slave trade does not take the same forms in the diaspora, it is possible to argue that my interlocutors found I was connected to Yemanjá because of my “foreignness”. In the Brazilian context, perhaps, the characteristics that would align me with a hunter deity (like body size and body type) were possibly less important than my exotic accent and my European features in the game of pairing humans and gods.

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<sup>55</sup> “Eles falam que você é de Logun porque você é magrela, parece caçadora!”

The Brazilian anthropologist Rita Amaral recounts a similar experience: initially identified with the orixá Obaluaiê (god of illness and health), she was treated with some degree of annoying reverence due to the dreaded powers of her personal deity. When the *jogo de búzios* unveiled she was instead a daughter of Ogum, whose character is considered more lively, the relationships with her interlocutors turned friendlier (Silva 2000, 90). Even if it is always said that only the *jogo de búzios* can determine one's orixá and that this is not dependant on the person's characteristics, these ethnographic examples show how important it is for outsiders to recognise themselves and to be recognised as part of a specific mythical universe (*ibid.*). Moreover, they demonstrate that the characteristics of the different gods and goddesses can be often measured against human bodies, personalities and features in a constant and layered renegotiation of sacred and profane identities. These dynamics also shape and affect the relationships between different members of the community, and I will dwell more on this topic in the following chapters.

It should be noted that the gradual, partial or full absorption of researchers into the religious community is also a common strategy for the sacred father or mother to gain some degree of control over the anthropologist by submitting him/her to the hierarchical relations already in place. Securing sacred and ritual ties with a particular community has the double effect of ensuring and legitimising the researcher's full access to the fieldwork but also subjecting him to the power relations, limitations and politics of the *terreiro*. These are limitations that I personally experienced as I gradually gained the confidence and trust of my interlocutors, and that prevented me,

for example, to extend my research field to other Candomblé houses that, for different reasons, stood in a position of rivalry or antagonism with respect to the *terreiro* of Arborio. Nevertheless, the ability to participate, be involved and grasp the dynamics of one or a few connected communities is still more desirable than roaming superficially from *terreiro* to *terreiro* while maintaining the rather cold status of a simple “guest”. The aforementioned techniques of absorption also affects the ways in which anthropologists obtain their data and sometimes influence the content of the academic production. Direct questioning is not always welcome in the sacred space, and ritual knowledge is passed through experience and practical learning rather than oral transmission. As an *egbomi* said to me once in the *terreiro* of Arborio: “When you will become initiated, I do not want to hear academic questions... children do not go to university!<sup>56</sup>”. Here the *egbomi* is making the point that my junior position in the sacred space is more relevant than my position as an academic.

Mattijs Van de Port beautifully explains the contraposition between the academic process of world-making — in which the researcher is the undisputable “author of the world”, and the modalities of world-making (and self-making) of Afro-Brazilian religions:

In other words, in Candomblé the idea is not to be the author of the world, but to let yourself be ‘written’ by the world. Spirit possession, I would say, is a clear example of this mode: allowing the body to be invaded by an Other is allowing the self to be ‘written’ by an agent

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<sup>56</sup> “Quando você fizer a iniciação, não quero ouvir perguntas de universitário... i bambini non vanno all’università!”

that comes from beyond the world of one's own making. (Van de Port 2011, 17)

Historically, anthropologists and researchers have often been present in Candomblé houses and contributed to the shaping and legitimising of Afro-Brazilian religious practices. However, their status of academics does not necessarily ensure them a place within the sacred space. The Brazilian movie *O Jardim das Folhas Sagradas*, directed by Pola Ribeiro in 2011, is the story of a *pai de santo* who tries to break with the tradition of animal sacrifices. His *terreiro* is studied and helped by a professor of anthropology, a character who, during a fire, is hit by a falling beam and dies. Just as in real life, anthropologists are common figures to be found in *terreiros*, but their presence is not essential to the plot of the film in which life goes on. Hence, the necessity of turning them, the outsiders, into something else.

For almost the whole the duration of my fieldwork, I was part of the *terreiro* of Arborio as an *abian*, a preliminary status to the initiation in which the person has some degree of involvement while also maintaining a certain freedom and independence from the obligations of the hierarchical structure. *Abians* are effectively *filhos da casa* (sons/daughters of the house) and are welcome to participate in the public rituals but do not have access to secret features and performances and, in most Candomblé houses, are not allowed into the sacred rooms where the *assentamentos* are. In order to obtain the status of *abian*, the person must go through a ritual called *lavagem das contas* (washing of the beads<sup>2</sup>: his/her patron orixá is determined through divination and the beads of corresponding colours are prepared, strung in a long necklace and washed in a herbal bath. The *abian* stays in a liminal

position in which he/she overcomes the status of “guest” and outsider without bearing the commitment of having one’s orixá *assentado*, fixed and installed physically in the sacred space. While technically maintaining all the interdictions of a non-initiated person, the *abian* is often able to grasp and see, due to the confidence gained and his pre-initiatory status, things that should remain in the sphere of secrecy. For example, while conducting fieldwork in the Candomblé house of Arborio, we received the visit of another student of anthropology who was collecting material for her thesis. On that occasion, Pai Mauro’s stepdaughter, Thais, was going through a rite of passage marking her fifth year in the religion, and she was kept in seclusion in the *roncó* to avoid uncontrolled energies to disturb her and to “corrupt” her *axé*. At some point, she had to go out of the *roncó*. As Thais could only be seen by other initiates, the “new” researcher was asked to temporarily leave the room. When Thais walked out of the *roncó* and saw me, she asked why I had been allowed to stay despite my status of non-initiated. The sacred mother’s answer was: “She has been preparing food for you for a week! Her energy is all over already!<sup>57</sup>”. Later in the day, someone else commented on the fact that it was better to be cautious with people whose energy and intentions are still unknown, as was the case of the researcher who had come to visit.

However, my approach to the fieldwork and my involvement in the community has never been completely opportunistic. My choice of becoming *abian* was not a mere methodological choice, but the result of a growing empathy towards Candomblé world-views after a few years of

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<sup>57</sup> “É uma settimana che lei sta qui a prepararti da mangiare! La sua energia è già qui!”.

research. For researchers coming from a secular background these kinds of involvements are normally facilitated by the fact that the category of “believing” is almost inapplicable. In fact in Candomblé *terreiros*, one’s willingness of *doing* something is far more valuable than one’s belief. I was never asked to recite a *creed*. However, I was asked if I had *faith*. Although these two words seem to express different nuances of the same concept, they seem to convey also a notion of membership which has political implications. In Brazilian Portuguese, a *crente* (believer) is someone who attends a church, often referred to Evangelical churches in particular (Evangelical churches represent the arch-enemies of Afro-Brazilian religions in the modern Brazilian socio-political landscape) (Silva 2007).

As Pai Odé said, talking about one of her most recent sacred daughters: “She used to be a *believer*... and look at her now! It looks like she has always been part of Candomblé!<sup>58</sup>”.

Conversely, the locution *ter fé* (having faith) represents, in this particular context, not one’s mere conviction of the existence of orixás and entities, but the devotional and submissive aspect of the religious practice.

Sacred Son: Here we prepare the food [offerings], we do everything with much love, much faith<sup>59</sup>. (Axé Ilé Obá, São Paulo)

Sacred Mother: You can bring beautiful clothes, you can bring some jewellery, some presents for your orixá, but do you know which is the thing he likes the most? Your faith<sup>60</sup>. (Axé Ilê Alaketu Aira, Arborio).

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<sup>58</sup> “Ela era crente... e agora olha para ela! Parece que só rodou Candomblé”

<sup>59</sup> Filho de santo: A gente aqui prepara a comida, faz tudo com muito carinho, com muita fé.

<sup>60</sup> Mãe de santo: Você pode levar roupa bonita, pode levar uma jóia, algum presente para o orixá, mas sabe o que ele gosta mais de tudo? A sua fé.

In these examples, “faith” appears to be the desirable state of mind for Candomblecists to come to the *terreiro* and perform the rituals, together with the confidence in the fact that their requests will be heard by the deities. Admittedly, the verb “to believe” does also convey these notions in its wider English meaning, but it is interesting to observe how the Portuguese corresponding verbs *crer* and *acreditar* are rarely used in the Afro-Brazilian context. Similar issues have been studied by Rodney Needham (1976), who dedicated one of his most important works to the analysis of linguistic categories when referred to emotions. Describing his frustration and difficulties in accurately translating the sentence “I believe in God” in the language spoke by the Penan people of Borneo, he raised doubts as to the actual existence of this particular state for people who do not have a word to define it.

Comparably, Deborah E. Tookers finds it problematic to describe the “animism” of the Akha people of Northern Thailand, which cannot be defined as “belief in the spirits” as in the interpretation of classic anthropological literature, because of the lack of a similar expression in the Akha language. As she explains in her ethnography, since worshipping is deeply connected to ethnic identity, it is hard to express in terms of “belief” what could be better indicated as “practice”.

[...] there were some Akha living in Chiang Mai, a large town in Northern Thailand, who were not practising spirit worship. But this was not because they did not believe in spirits, but rather because they

were no longer within the village community which structures and is structured by practices relating to spirit worship. Belief was not an issue. The identity of one's community determined to a large extent, if not completely, one's practices (Tooker 1992, 802).

Tooker singles out a term that most conveys the Western meaning of 'religion', which is *zán*, as 'custom', 'way of doing things'. However, *zán* cannot be believed in, it can be *carried*, using the same verb as in "carrying a basket" or a load. This "burden of ancestors or spirits", as she puts it (*idem*, p. 803), can be only carried within the borders of one's social environment.

As for Candomblecists, the action of believing in the orixás seems to be a relatively trivial issue within the borders of the *terreiro*. Indeed, from an ontological perspective, what is there to believe in energies and entities that are already an active and interactive part of one's landscape, with their own agency, in the form of thunder, river or stone?

In the animic ontology [...] what is unthinkable is the very idea that life is played out upon the inanimate surface of a ready-made world (Ingold 2011, 17).

Another word used to describe one's personal involvement and devotion is the rather banal verb *gostar*, "to like". When one of my interlocutors, a Brazilian *egbomi* and sacred daughter of Pai Odé, found out I was carrying out research about Candomblé, she looked at me suspiciously and asked me "Yes, but do you like the religion?"<sup>61</sup>. This question struck me as it was not focusing on whether I believed it, but whether I enjoyed it. I found other

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<sup>61</sup> "Sim, mas você gosta da religião?"



examples in which the word “to like” was used to describe one’s position and attachment towards the religion.

Pai Mauro: [*talking about the responsibilities of being a Candomblecist*] it is a commitment, but not a very heavy one, because if you know why you do it and you do it because you *like* it, it is not a burden...<sup>62</sup> (Ilê Axé Alaketu Airá).

Brazilian ogã: Sometimes I feel like everything is going badly, but in the end I have friends, I am doing well with my job, I have a religion that I *like*...<sup>63</sup> (Ilê Axé Alaketu Odé Tolá).

Indeed, one’s enjoyment of the rituals and one’s appreciation of Candomblé aesthetics (clothes, chants, dances, etc.) seem to be of fundamental importance. As Pai Mauro put it “Candomblé is for everyone, but not everyone is for Candomblé”, meaning that not everyone is inclined to submit themselves to such a commitment with both deities and sacred families. Therefore, one’s willingness to enter this world must be driven by personal satisfaction. However, in certain cases the initiation is also seen as an unavoidable way to escape a state of mental or physical affliction. States of unease, malaise, and depression are sometimes “cured” through one’s initiation, as they are regarded to be originated in a sort of spiritual unbalance which the orixá will help to restore. A Brazilian sacred mother once told me how she was feeling very sick and decided to go to a doctor.

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<sup>62</sup> Pai Mauro: è un impegno, neanche poi più di tanto gravoso perché, se sai perché lo fai e lo fai perché ti piace, non è un impegno gravoso.

<sup>63</sup> Ogã: A volte penso che va tutto male, ma alla fine ho degli amici, il lavoro va bene, ho una religione che mi piace...

Once having visited her, the doctor said: “Madame, you have absolutely nothing! I will give you a piece of advice... go to see a *pai de santo*!”

However, this process works also the other way around: a condition of sudden and mysterious sickness can be interpreted as a sign that the orixá is demanding someone’s “head”. Normally, the persuasive methods of the orixás in convincing someone to enter the religion involve strange symptoms, prolonged headaches and unexpected trance possession. “Be careful, or they will start teasing you...” an Italian elder said to me once, warning me on the possibility that the orixás could start pushing me in an unpleasant way. A Brazilian *egbomi* shared with me his experience of being induced to do the initiation because of illness.

I did my initiation when I was a child, I was very sick, my mother brought me to a *terreiro* and I “fell” [in trance]... I had to do it, I did not have any other option.<sup>64</sup>

The initiation also seems to have collateral healing properties *per se*. This was the case of two sacred sons of the Italian *terreiro*, who both shared with me how the ritual had the unexpected effect of curing some mild conditions from which they were suffering. A *yawó* said that when he was preparing for his period of seclusion, he bought a stock of medicines against rhinitis, but the sacred father said he would not need them. As it turned out, not only he did not experience any of the symptoms from which he had been suffering, but he also never needed the medicines again following his initiation.

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<sup>64</sup> Eu me iniciei quando era criança, estava muito doente, minha mãe me levou num terreiro e eu bolei... e tive que fazer o santo, não tinha outra opção.

Similarly, an Italian woman who was initiated in Brazil said he was suffering from an inflammation of the inner ear, but this condition completely healed after the ritual. Once again, these examples show how the relationship between humans and orixás, far from indicating only one's spiritual attachment and/or one's social position in the religious hierarchy, is also inscribed in the human body, a place where deities and entities can manifest and communicate their intentions and desires. Candomblé followers have an expression to indicate that there are two ways of joining Candomblé: *pela amor ou pela dor* ("out of love or out of sorrow"). Humans and orixás negotiate different ways of creating a bond whose purpose can be opportunistic, necessary, strategic, devotional or a mixture of these.

In this framework, my approach to the fieldwork could be ascribed to what some scholars have called "methodological ludism". Droogers (2008, 452-456) theorises this method trying to provide a methodological tool for the study of religious contexts while also escaping the epistemological dichotomy between science and religion. While methodological atheism has the effect of reducing everything to the social representation of reality, denying the importance of the religious experience, a methodological theism accepts the reality of these manifestation of the sacred without problematising them. Similarly, an agnostic position avoids taking this problem into consideration. As a result, Droogers proposes a way in between based on the ability of human beings to play in and out of their role. In this way, the scholar is encouraged to use his/her own body as a tool

to share the religious experience of his/her interlocutors independently of his/her personal convictions. Moreover, he argues that this playful attitude diminishes the gap between the researcher and his/her interlocutors, promoting a participatory approach to the construction of scientific knowledge. Indeed, this methodological approach is based on the notion that participant observation is a ludic activity in itself, one relying on the researcher's capability of balancing between and within two different realities.

However, as observed by Knibbe and Droogers (2011), an approach based on play and experience can also have serious consequences. Knibbe recounts that, during her research among the followers of a Dutch spiritualist medium and healer called Jomanda, the immersive play led her to take on the religious *habitus* and to experience similar emotional turmoil, doubts and excitement of her interlocutors during the healing sessions. This phase of deep immersion and learning is regarded as necessary in order to be able to subsequently switch back to the academic role. However, fieldwork can be a transformative experience that researchers are rarely, or perhaps never, trained to deal with.

To take the game seriously means being open to the possibility that your life will change because of these sensations: it is no longer 'as if', but 'what if this is really what is.' To take this existential risk is not something that can be expected lightly from a researcher, or that can be discussed in an annual evaluation as a plus or a minus point in the performance of a job. (*idem.* p. 296).

These are instances and problems I personally experienced when I started showing the “symptoms” of trance possession during Candomblé rituals, feeling dizziness, heat, increasing heartbeat, heavy eyelids and light shaking. These events forced me to reconsider my positioning of *abian* and eventually led me to undergo the initiation ritual at the end of my fieldwork, becoming a *yawó* and consequently starting again from a new position, at the bottom of the Candomblé social ladder.

The situation in which a non-initiated person falls into trance, sometimes called *bolar no santo* (falling in the saint) is regarded to be a proper “calling”, in which the orixá him/herself demands someone’s initiation. This event immediately triggers a series of renegotiations both at a personal level and within the social sphere of the *terreiro*. Such an exceptional (although not that rare) event calls for a restructuring of one’s position in the hierarchy and degree of involvement. Once again, the fieldwork experience of the anthropologist Rita Amaral helps to understand these dynamics. She recounts how, during a Candomblé celebration, the orixá Ogun (who had taken possession of a devotee’s body) came to her and “suspended” (*suspender*) her as an *equede*. The so-called *suspensão* is when an incorporated (*incorporado*, who took someone’s body) orixá indicates someone among the non-initiated to become an *equede* or *ogã*, and it is the equivalent of the *bolar no santo* for people who cannot go into trance. When in trance, the orixá takes the hands of the person and makes him/her sit three times on a special chair reserved for people in the high ranks of the *terreiro*. Both events, the *suspensão* and the *bolar no santo*, are considered explicit



Candomblé women and the anthropologist ©Valéria Santos

manifestations of the orixás' will and they are characterised in a positive way, which makes them harder to resist.

Rita Amaral: How to say no to an orixá, to a god that has just chosen you, even if he/she never saw you? [...] So that I argued to Ogum that I could not do anything for him. "I cannot do anything for you". "But I want your heart", he said to me, "You have a good heart". If an orixá "suspends" you in the name of your heart, what do you do? There is nothing you can do. (Silva 2000, 95).<sup>65</sup>

It can be argued that both events are part of the aforementioned techniques of absorption of the researcher or outsider in the Candomblé world. However, these engagements are not set in motion by humans, but by the orixás themselves who participate and interact with humans through a code

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<sup>65</sup> Rita Amaral: Como dizer não para um orixá, para um deus que acabou de te escolher, mesmo nunca tendo te visto na vida? [...] Tanto que eu argumtei com Ogum que eu não podia fazer nada. "Eu não posso fazer nada pelo senhor". "Mas eu quero seu coração", ele falou para mim, "Você tem coração bom". Se um orixá te suspende em nome do seu coração, você vai fazer o que? Não tem o que fazer. (Silva 2000, 95).

of symbolic actions. Obviously such requests are more difficult to decline, not only because they come directly from deities and entities who have more authority than humans, but also because they take place during the actual rituals or ceremonies. These requests are different from the subtle and seductive hints that I described among human peers precisely because of their explicit and public form as part of a sacred performance.

Despite expressing a similar kind of meaning, these two modalities of interaction — the *bolar no santo* and the *suspensão* — between humans and gods have rather different outcomes in the social structure. While the *suspensão* results in an acknowledgement of the researcher's presence in the religious community, giving him/her the privileges of full participation, high status and immediate unveiling of all ritual secrets, the *bolar no santo* not only implies a new start from a lower hierarchical status, but also involves the researcher's bodily experience being exposed.

Similar issues have been raised by Katharine L. Wiegele describing her fieldwork while studying a charismatic Christian group in the Philippines. Wiegele recounts her struggle to elaborate her personal experience when she was “slain in the spirit” by a priest (a situation in which devotees lie on the floor semi-unconscious as the power of God or the Holy Spirit is called upon them by a priest). She describes her sense of inadequacy and exposure, while at the same time the event increased the confidence of the young priest who slayed her (Wiegele 2012, 77-78). Moreover, she wonders if her position as a non-believer researcher could allow her to have the same experience of her interlocutors. While Wiegele struggles evaluating her

experience as an authentic methodological tool, I would like to stress how the researcher's bodily experience is often a primary source of ethnographic data not only because of his/her ability of internalising social values but also because the body is a fundamental place of renegotiation of one's power, status and inclusion within a social group. As Merleau-Ponty stated:

Our bodily experience of movement is not a particular case of knowledge; it provides us with a way of access to the world and the object, with a 'praktognosia', which has to be recognized as original and perhaps as primary. My body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my 'symbolic' or 'objectifying function'. (2005 [1962], 162).

When the bodily experience is validated by the context and by one's ability of being-in-the-world, its authenticity should not be problematic. However, it should be taken into consideration as part of a learning process the anthropologist undergoes, whose achievements and outcomes have consequences in the way the researcher moves and is perceived in the social environment.

The aim of the ethnographer who uses full participation as a methodology is not 'to go native' or to 'play pretend' to have gone native, but rather to cultivate a form of openness to the affective intensities of the other culture – an *empathic ability* – as well as a form of self-observation and paying attention to the effect they have on him – an *introspective ability* (Halloy 2016, 19).



## 4. Ritual and Sacrifice

*Fieldwork notes:*

*09/09/2015 - Ilé Axé Alaketu Aira, Arborio (Italy)*

*“Everyone in the main room, now! Set the straw mats, we’ll start in five minutes” — Pai Mauro shouts from the corridor, while the sacred sons and daughters are still busy preparing the offerings in the kitchen. People rush preparing the last few things and walk into the salon. Someone picks up a couple of straw mats from Exú’s room, which not only hosts the assentamentos of three Exús but also works as a sort of storage for pots, pans, trays and other utensils. The mats are placed in line on one side of the barracão, and the yawós take the position of okunlé, (a reverential posture which consists of kneeling on the floor while letting the head rest on two fists, one on top of the other), with their heads facing the door. The yawós arrange themselves in order of seniority, from the person who has been initiated first to the youngest. There are about ten people taking part to the ritual: the pai de santo and the mãe de santo, one equede, two ebomis and three yawós. I take part as an abián, therefore, as usual, my place is at the very end of the line, followed only by Lara, a sympathiser who often comes to the terreiro without having formal involvements within the hierarchy.*

*Previously, eight cockerels and two doves were prepared, washed and put back in their cages, ready to be sacrificed. Everyone is ready to start the orô, the ritual that is performed to feed the orixás — Xangô and Airá, in this particular occasion. At a signal, we lower our gaze to the floor and we clap our hands synchronically to the “paó”, — three long claps and seven fading shorter claps, repeated three times — which marks the start (and the end) of every ritual.*

### 4.1 Where does a ritual begin?

In this excerpt from my fieldwork notes Pai Mauro, the sacred father of the Candomblé house of Arborio, encourages the people present to start a

specific ritual. Indeed, this ritual seems to be marked by a variety of conditions — the position of one's body, the order in which the initiates sit, the objects and animals that have been previously prepared and the rhythmic clapping that indicates the solemnity of the moment. Rituals start and end, creating a timeframe in which different rules and behaviours than usual need to be applied. However, the social actors described in this case had already entered a ritual space (the *terreiro*), were already properly dressed for the rituals (using white clothes, long skirts for women and a turban on their heads), and were already engaging in ritually codified actions for example, cooking the offerings or washing the animals. All these factors already represented ritualized elements which constituted a breach of everyday behavioural codes.

Anthropological literature struggles to find a consistent definition of “ritual”, because of the variety of ritual modalities and situations than have been described by ethnographers. As Schechner (2008, 775) observes, there is a consensus about the presence of repetitive actions in rituals that are invariant and regularly performed, but this does not help distinguishing a ritual from routine actions such as the ones employed to maintain one's personal hygiene or repetitive actions during the working hours in a factory. Interestingly, several ethnographic studies show how rituals are often called “works” by the social actors who perform them. This applies to Candomblé actors as well, who say to gather to do *trabalhos* (or *lavori*, in the Italian case study), two words that mean “work” in both languages. Rappaport observes how the Maring people of Papua New Guinea name rituals as *kongung*, which is the same term used to indicate the action of making a

garden. Despite these ambiguities the distinction between work and ritual is perfectly clear to its performers. Catherine Bell, in her complex analysis of ritual theory, tries to overcome this problem by arguing that ritual actions retain a symbolic value for a social or religious group and are also ways of exerting power. According to Bell, rituals are not fixed things but processes and ways of acting which include formal and performative elements and normally make an appeal to tradition (1997, 138). In order to stress the process rather than the act, she introduces the notion of “ritualization” which she explains as “a way of doing things to trigger the perception that these practices are distinct and the associations that they engender are special” (Bell 1992, 220).

Indeed, while the situation previously described clearly shows that rituals are delimited in time and space, the details of the ritualized performance allow the emergence of many blurred delimitations. In *terreiros* the process of ritualization is incremental and moves along the axes of hierarchy, secrecy and space. When a Candomblecist walks into a worship house on the occasion of the *trabalhos*, he/she must immediately take a herbal bath to purify his/her body, then he/she must wear white and clean clothes and greet the *assentamentos* of all the orixás. Then, he/she must greet the sacred father/mother and all the hierarchically important people in the house. The action of greeting is performed by *bater cabeça*, a reverential movement which consists of touching the ground with one’s forehead, a movement that varies depending on the gender and quality of one’s personal orixá. After that the person can start taking part in the “works”, which could be cooking



The ritual space. Ilê Axé Alaketu Aira (Arborio, Italy) ©Giovanna Capponi

the offerings, collecting leaves, but also cleaning the bathroom or preparing a meal for the people present. Although performed within a ritual space, all these actions have different degrees of solemnity, formality and prescriptions, and are often intersected by informal conversations and spontaneous gestures. Some of these actions, such as cooking the offerings, must be performed in a very prescriptive way, following strict recipes and techniques, but allow an informality in conversations and postures. Other activities, for example, entering the rooms of the orixás, require stricter control of one's behaviours, such as lowering one's voice and taking one's shoes off. Conversely, when rituals "start", as in the situation I previously described, concentration and a complete control of one's posture, movements, voice and even thoughts must be performed. The wider space and timeframe of the *terreiro* seems to be divided into micro-ritual spaces — for example the rooms where the *assentamentos* are stored or the straw mats — and periods — the moment of cooking the offerings or performing

the sacrifices — in which solemnity, formality and control increase or decrease. The more sacred the situation or the space, the more control and formality those in the lower positions of the hierarchy need to apply. For example, during the sacrificial rituals, *yawós* need to take their shoes off and stay with their heads on the straw mats, as they are not permitted to see what is happening in the *assentamentos*' rooms, while *egbomis* with a higher status can wear shoes or sandals and help performing the actual slaughtering. In fact, initiates with low status in the hierarchy have limited access the sacred spaces and objects. The sacred space seems to be divided into concentric circles of sacrality, in which the outer circle represents the perimeter of the Candomblé house, where everyone is allowed irrespective of affiliation status, the middle circle is represented by the rooms of the orixás, where only initiates can enter, and the inner space is represented by the *assentamentos* themselves, that can only be opened and handled by seniors. This concentric structure of power, secrecy and sacrality can be also observed during the public celebrations in which the devotees dance in circle around a pole representing the *axé* of the house: *egbomis* are permitted to dance closer to the pole forming an inner circle, while novices have to stay in the outer circle. Following a similar metaphor, Johnson describes in his book *Secrets, Gossips and Gods*, the journey of a novice inside the world of Candomblé through a sort of narrative camera movement. The novice is seen coming from the street into the main gate of the *terreiro* in the position of *abián*, then is described penetrating the secret rooms during the initiation process. As for sacrificial rituals, reaching a

higher hierarchical status allows the novice to “zoom in” and increase his/her proximity with the sacred (2002, 108-123).

From these few examples it can be noted that rituals bring into play different forces, tensions and dynamics within a social group, making it difficult for ethnographers to set clear limits, definitions and explanations. The work of Gilbert Lewis (1980) highlights the problems encountered by ethnographers when encountering what might appear to be rituals or ritualized situations. In his analysis of rites of puberty among the Gnau of Papua New Guinea, Lewis faces the challenges of giving formal interpretations to actions that do not always convey a cohesive or deliberate meaning. Symbols deliver a message that is often received subjectively and recorded through one's own personal sensitivity. Lewis conceives rituals as performances and plays that cannot be decoded, but only captured in the uncertain significance they evoke. Moreover, the author acknowledges that the strict rules of ritual are also subjected to the creative interpretation of the celebrants and to his/her own personal tastes or reasons. This element is particularly evident in Candomblé, and it is exemplified in the saying *cada casa é um caso* (“each *terreiro* is a different case”). Priests and priestesses reinterpret the traditional rules that they have learned during the initiation process and reconfigure them in the new Candomblé house they found, according to their needs and personal ideas. In the Italian case study this creative element is also driven by climatic, geographic and social changes. However, it is important to observe that the process of modifying and changing one's tradition is also a well-established phenomenon in Brazil. I will analyse how traditions and ritual practices, especially those connected to offerings and sacrificial

killings, are far from being homogeneous and are the subject of controversies, debates and even dismissal among Candomblecists. In fact, despite the diversity of ritual practices, there is a general tension concerning authenticity and tradition in which each sacred father or mother claims the rightfulness of his/her version of the ritual practice. Indeed, ritual cannot only be considered for its symbolic and functional value, but also for its efficacy in communicating with the invisible world and renewing the *axé*. In the collection of essays *Ritual in its own right*, Kapferer (2004) stresses the importance of experience and argues that ritual must be seen as an alternative reality that does not make references to the external world, but whose actions stand alone in its unique dimension.

However, Candomblecists admit that adaptation is a fundamental part of the religious practice, and this process involves renegotiating directly with the invisible world in order to safely perform these changes. As I will explain in detail, Candomblé rituals do not only imply performance, secrecy, hierarchical structure, tradition, and experience, but should be considered primarily as a form of communication and interaction between humans and non-humans.

## **4.2 Rituals as recipes: adaptations and innovations**

As I have discussed, although the borders of ritual action are blurred, rituals normally follow strict rules and a particular order. Normally, Candomblecists gather at the *terreiro* to perform two types of rituals: to feed and worship a particular orixá (or a set of orixás that “eat” together) or to participate to the initiation or rite of passage (called *obrigação*, literally

obligation, commitment<sup>66</sup>) of one or more members of the community. All the orixás are worshipped and fed once a year in every Candomblé house, and the rituals are normally distributed across the year in order to accommodate the followers' needs. While some houses set their ritual calendar according to a particular tradition, others use other criteria to decide on which dates the rituals are going to be performed. The Axé Oxumaré of Salvador, one of the most important and ancient Candomblé houses in Brazil, follows a traditional rule in which the rituals dedicated to Oxalá, called *Águas de Oxalá* ("Waters of Oxalá") need to be performed on the first Friday of the year, marking the first event of the sacred calendar. All the *terreiros* that belong to the tradition of the Axé Oxumaré need to perform that same ritual after it has been performed in their own sacred father's or mother's house. Therefore, the Candomblé house of Pai Kabila, who is direct descendant of the Axé Oxumaré, performs the *Águas de Oxalá* in February; Pai Odé, who is Pai Kabila's sacred son, performs the ritual in his *terreiro* around March and Pai Mauro, Pai Odé's sacred son and priest of the Italian Candomblé house, normally sets the date of the same ritual between April and May. The different times of the celebrations here are used to stress the hierarchical structure of the extended sacred family.

Other traditions require that the celebrations dedicated to Oxalá coincide with the yam harvest, around September, as yam is one of Oxalá's favourite food. By comparing different liturgical calendars of different Candomblé

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<sup>66</sup> This translation of the term 'ritual' has also been mentioned by Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process*, where he translates the Ndembu word for 'ritual' — *chidika* — as "special engagement", "obligation" (Turner 1991, 11).



houses in Brazil it is possible to note that celebrations dedicated to Xangô are often in June, while the *festas* of Oxum and Yemanjá are normally held in December. Despite these commonalities, many *terreiros* schedule their events by taking into account other factors, such as availability, suitability and even bank or national holidays in order to facilitate the attendance of the sacred sons. For example, Pai Odé works in Italy during the summer (in the Northern Hemisphere), therefore events do not normally take place between June and September in his house. Conversely, Pai Mauro has to take into account different things when deciding when to schedule the rituals in the Italian *terreiro*. In fact, the cold climate of Piedmont makes it difficult to perform the rituals during the winter. Most ritual actions require the participants to remain barefoot and the costs of heating the entire house over the winter would be unsustainable for the community. For this reason, Pai Mauro's liturgical calendar normally starts in April and runs until September.

Each *terreiro* normally schedules one or two celebrations a month, whose preparations last at least for a few days, normally covering a long weekend.<sup>67</sup> However, these occasions can coincide with the initiation or *obrigação* of a sacred son/daughter, which may take additional days depending on the situation. The most frequent rituals taking place in these occasions can be divided in four types: *ebó*, *borí*, *orô* and *candomblé*. *Ebós* (literally *offering*, *sacrifice* in Yoruba) are food offerings that are passed over the body of the participants for a specific purpose, be it purification,

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<sup>67</sup> There are also minor events or rituals that fall out of the official celebrations.

spiritual cleansing or resolving personal issues related to health or family. The food preparations employed in *ebós* can be made of *canjica* (white maize), manioc flour mixed with water, palm oil or honey, rice, popcorn, eggs and even live animals such as chickens. The food items are passed over the body of the person to transfer their energy to him/her in front of the *assentamento* of the orixá or entity who will take care of that particular case, the animals are slaughtered on top of it. They are then “dispatched” (*despachados*), wrapped in a piece of cloth and left in a particular spot in the landscape, for example under a tree or in the river.

The *bori* is a ritual normally performed before of an initiation or another rite of passage. However, an *ebó* or a *bori* can also be performed for an outsider, normally a client of the sacred father or mother who is willing to undergo the ritual as a way to solve a particular problem. In fact, it is common for *terreiros* to maintain themselves economically by offering magical-religious services to clients and sympathisers looking for spiritual orientation or help on more mundane problems, often aiming to propitiate romantic relationships or financial issues.

The *bori* (literally “feeding the head” in Yoruba), is meant to help the person to gain some emotional stability and clarity of thought: Roger Bastide calls it a “prophylactic rite” and not only a rite of inclusion (2005, 45). As a Brazilian sacred mother told me, “all problems come from the head”, and the head is considered an entity in itself that needs to be taken care of, fed and healed. While *ebós* can be performed in a variety of different ways and with different ingredients, the *bori* follows a much more rigid structure, allowing some variations on a fixed pattern. Gisèle Omindarewá Cossard

describes the simple version of the *borí* as an offering of an *obi* (kola nut) and a chicken in order to strengthen the novice's head before the initiation (2006, 146). Vogel et al. make a more detailed ethnographic description of this ritual, mentioning honey, salt, palm oil, water, kola nuts that will be used for divination purposes, *acaçá* (a white maize porridge wrapped in banana leaves), a leaf of *folha-da-costa* (a succulent subtropical plant dedicated to Oxalá), a guineafowl and a dove (1993, 35). According to the authors, the guineafowl, symbolizing dynamism and individuality, is sacrificed to shake the novice's energy, while the dove is used for its calming properties. As can be noted, these descriptions of the birds' symbolism match the discourses of my interlocutors when interrogated about the symbolic meaning of the different birds in rituals. The authors proceed by describing the different steps that compose the ritual, the chants and the sequence of ingredients that are used to feed the novice's head.

Despite the fact that everyone can undergo such a ritual, in the majority of the Candomblé houses I visited the *borí* is performed secretly. In order to respect the ritual secrecy, I will omit some details in my own ethnographic description. These rituals appear to be similar in Pai Mauro's and Pai Odé's houses, as one learnt from the other.

First of all, the sacred father consults the *jogo de búzios* (cowrie shell divination) to decide if the *borí* is appropriate for the occasion and to determine the peculiarities that have to be taken into consideration. In fact the choice of the animals and the ingredients that will be used is negotiated during the divination process according to the person's particular needs. The person undergoing the ritual comes to the *terreiro* a few hours before dusk

and is invited to dress in white, take a herbal bath and rest. After dusk, he/she is taken into a small room called *roncó* and is invited to sit on a straw mat. The sacred father and the sacred sons gather and start the ritual by clapping the *paó*, the rhythmical pattern I mentioned previously, which normally marks the beginning and the end of solemn ritual moments. Some of the ingredients that are used are flowers, fruit, water, kola nuts, boiled white maize, *acaçá*. The animals that are employed can be a guineafowl and a dove, a single dove, a chicken and a guineafowl or other combinations, depending on the situation. The *borí* is regarded as invoking the energies of the orixás Oxalá and Yemanjá, respectively called the father and the mother of all heads, as they are also considered the progenitors of all the orixás. These orixás dislike red or dark colours, so the *borí* in Pai Mauro's and Pai Odé's tradition normally lacks palm oil or other dark items. The ingredients are offered to the person's head and the birds are slaughtered following the same logic. Each time an ingredient is used and/or poured on top of the person's head, a specific chant is sung. Vogel et al. (1993, 38-41) describe the chants that are sung during the sacrifice which is normally performed by the sacred father with the help of the *ogãs*. For the guineafowl they transcribe the following *orin*:

BÀBÁ BÍ A BI ETÙ KONKEN

BÀBÁ BÌÌ A BÌÌ ETÚ KONKEN

This prayer is translated by the authors as:

*Father, he will be born, he will be born as a guineafowl, konken*<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Pai, ele nacerá, ele nacerá galinha de angola, conquém.

For the sacrifice of the dove they indicate another chant:

EIYELE

È NWÁ J'ADIE

ÒLOWO, OJÚ MON MON

MO JÚBÀ LOJU OLÓÒRUN

OJÙ MON MON

ÀGÒ ÁLÁ

OLÓÒRUN K'ÌBÀ SE

OLUWO OJÚ MON MON

Translation: *The dove / Is your chicken / Lord of the secret, the sun is high already / We worship at the presence of Olorun / At sunrise / With the permission of the Alá (purity) / May this blessing be accepted / Lord of the secret, the sun is high already*<sup>69</sup>

I would like to compare these transcriptions with the ones reported by another Brazilian anthropologist, Robson Rogério Cruz (1995, 25-26), in his work. In the version of the ritual he examines, the sacrifice of the guineafowl is accompanied by the following words:

QUENQUENQUEN BABA BI UÁ BI ETÚ, QUENQUENQUEN

Translation: *Kenkenken (imitating the sound of the guineafowl) / Father, create us like the guineafowl*<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> O pombo / É vossa galinha / Dono do segredo, o dia já amanheceu / Reverenciamos na presença de Olorun / Ao amanhecer do dia / Com licença do Alá (da pureza) / Que a bênção seja aceita / Dono do segredo, o dia já amanheceu.

<sup>70</sup> Pai, nos gere iguais à galinha d'angola

Similarly, the sacrifice of the dove goes:

EIE-LÊ OROMADIÉ OLOJU MAMÃ

MOJUBÁ LESSÉ OLORUM

OJU MAMÃ

AGUALÁ, OLORUM BÓ TÉ

OJU MAMÃ

Translation: *Dove, chick with bright eyes / I ask the blessing at the feet of God / The day is getting brighter / Morning star, it is the rising sun / the day gets brighter*<sup>71</sup>

I will abstain from reporting the chants I listened to in the Candomblé houses I visited, but it is important to note that the *cantigas* I transcribed in my fieldnotes represent a third version of the same prayer, both in the transcriptions and in the meaning associated with it.

Bearing in mind the inherent difficulties in translating Yoruba chants, it can be observed how the different versions, despite being semantically different, contain similar words and similar elements. In all cases, the guineafowl is associated with the birth of a new life, reminding the initiation process as explained in the myth. Moreover, all chants contain the imitation of its sound. In a similar way, the dove is associated with the beginning of a new day, with light and purity. Despite the differences, it is clear that the modalities described here are only versions of the same ritual chants that

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<sup>71</sup> Pombo, pinto de olhos brilhantes / peço a bênção aos pés de Deus / O dia está clareando /

Estrela da manhã, é o sol que chega / o dia clareia

have been consciously modified, misunderstood, lost in translation or innovated by different actors.

After the person's head has been "fed" with animal blood and all the other food items and ingredients, the participants greet the *orí* by shouting "Orí ôôôô", they clap *paó* and the solemnity dissipates. The person must remain in the *roncô* overnight and sleep on the straw mat, while the other participants will take the sacrificed birds to the kitchen. The birds will be plucked, eviscerated, and cleaned, separating some of the internal organs, which will be cooked with oil and onion together with the rest of the bird, which will be served to the person to eat. The eating of the offerings of the *borí* (meat, *canjica*, fruit) is encouraged but is not compulsory.

The ritual I have described represents a basic structure. In my account, I omitted not only the secret features, but also some of the particularities that can be aggregated or changed according to the situation. These innovations and changes are made for specific reasons. For example, a son of Oxossi cannot receive an *ebó* containing honey, so all the typical food items (manioc flour, *canjica*, acaçá etc.) will be present but those containing honey will be omitted in the ritual. However, some other modifications can be applied according to the personal sensitivity of the sacred father or mother. As a sacred mother told me, "Sometimes I do things the usual way, then it is like feeling something and knowing that, no, I must add something else, or no, this one cannot be used this time". This creative and emotional aspect represents the sensitivity Lewis was talking about while explaining that rituals do not follow encrypted codifications but are freely interpreted in

an experiential process. Ritual practices imply not only a set of rules imposed by the tradition, but involve expertise and specialist knowledge in the making and manipulating of ingredients, objects, sounds and energies. In this sense, I would like to use the metaphor of rituals as recipes: in order to make a particular dish, certain ingredients are required. While some of these items can be replaced or substituted, others are fundamental to maintain the identity of the dish. The same applies to its execution and aesthetic. However, the ability to know (or sense) which are the fundamental parts of a ritual and which can be subjected to substitution, omission or innovation can be acquired only by absorbing the cultural values associated to those actions and by intimately understanding the meaning and the purpose of the ritual. Beyond the symbols, rules and traditions, ritual is characterised by sensorial experience which combines material culture, cultural knowledge, social values and group identity. Here I can relate to the notion of *sensibility* coined by Kathryn Linn Geurts: “as a term that unites individual experience with perception, thought, cultural meaning, and social interaction” (2002, 17).

#### **4.3 What is sacrifice for? Variations on a theme**

As can be observed in the description of the *borí*, Candomblé rituals revolve mostly around food offerings and animal sacrifice and imply the notions of feeding, exchanging, and propitiating through symbolic animals and objects that convey a certain type of energy. Anthropological literature presents countless examples of sacrificial practices and throughout the history of the



discipline different authors elaborated various theories to explain them. Tylor's *gift-theory* argues that human communities offer animals to supernatural beings as if they were chiefs (1871), Robertson Smith's *communion theory* (1907) stresses the importance of conviviality, as the meat of sacrificial offerings is shared by men and gods, having as an effect the strengthening of social ties. Herbert and Mauss (1899) are the first to highlight the idea of consecration, following the etymology of sacrifice (from Latin: *sacer facere* "making something sacred", "consecrating"). This act of consecration changes the status of the sacrificial victim, which becomes an intermediary between humans and gods. The destruction of the victim makes it "blend" with the sphere of sacrality, but also the sacrificer gains a contact with the sacred through the action. However, Hubert and Mauss highlight a parallel aspect, which is the abnegation, the renunciation that the sacrificer makes in order to offer the animal, often taken from his/her livestock. In this act of dedication the celebrant "sacrifices" a part of himself for a greater purpose. These theories, based mostly on bibliographic sources, paved the way for a generation of anthropologists who encountered, described in great detail and analysed animal sacrificial practices in their fieldworks. Given the impossibility of reviewing here all the contributions that criticised and re-interpreted the various theories on sacrifice, I will only mention a few authors whose ethnographic examples relate to my case study. First I would like to highlight how sacrificial practices often represent a form of exchange between humans and the invisible world. Evans-Pritchard singles out two types of sacrifices, which he calls "confirmatory" and "piacular". The first celebrates the change of

social status of one or more members of the community (as in a rite of passage) while the second serves the purpose of liberating the community or the sacrificer from sickness or misfortune. Following Hubert & Mauss's interpretation, Evans-Pritchard argues how sacred forces follow two opposite movements in the two types of sacrificial rites:

Whence it follows that there are two main types of sacrifices distinguished by a difference of orientation. In the first the sacred forces are transmitted through the victim to the sacrificer, who gains, often by partaking of its flesh, a sacred character he lacked before the sacrifice. These are sacrifices of sacralization. The other type of sacrifices is that of desacralization. In these of the sacred forces are transmitted through the victim away from the sacrificer. They do not make sacred the profane but they make profane what is sacred. (1954, 24)

Therefore, while initiations and marriages among the Nuer require "sacrifices of sacralization", the transferral of negative forces such as illnesses to the animal and its subsequent destruction represent an act of desacralization. Evans-Pritchard's original interpretation of Hubert & Mauss's theories lies not only in describing the nuances of meaning and intentions of the different forms of sacrifices, but also in admitting that the animal acts as a substitute more than an intermediary. The life of the ox is taken instead of the life of a human. However, he denies that the need for substitution is present in confirmatory sacrifices, whose intentions are celebrative and do not present aspects of danger and expiation as do piacular sacrifices (ibid. 31).

Since oxen are already substitutions of humans, they can be replaced by other animals of less value, or even with vegetables such as cucumbers. This famous example highlights a very important issue: sacrificial practices are normally expensive and involve the destruction of material resources. For this reason it is important to take into consideration the role of these particular animal species in society, the availability of livestock resources and the social status associated to them in order to fully understand the implication of animal sacrifice (Firth 1963, 13-15). Indeed, there are diverse ethnographic accounts showing evidence for the presence — in practice or in theory — of human sacrifice or human elements associated to the sacrificial victim. In Yorubaland human sacrifice to the *orisa* deities was a common practice until its prohibition at the end of the 19th century (Ojo 2005). According to Ojo, human victims were slaves or criminals and sacrifices were performed by the elite to affirm its power and authority during annual celebrations or chiefs' funerals, or as a ritualized form of capital punishment after judicial trials. Mentioning practices of substitution in popular religion, Awolalu recounts how a Yoruba man sacrifices a chick to trick the evil witches who were haunting his son: "The chick offered was a substitute for the man's child; the chick thus died, as it were, the child's death" (Awolalu 1973, 83). The idea of sacrifice as substitution has been extensively explored by Rane Willerslev in his work based on the data collected among the Chukchi of the Siberian North. In particular, he analyses practices like voluntary death and self-sacrifice, in which elderly people, at end of their lives, express the wish to be killed by their relatives (2009). In Willerslev's interpretation the triangular relationship between the

sacrificer, the victim and the deity is finally overcome with the achievement of the “optimal sacrifice”, the one in which the life of the human is taken instead of the life of the animal. Moreover, this exchange reverses the value of humans in a stage of life that is considered “worthless” in terms of human social and material reproduction.

In other words, when the living carry out a human sacrifice, they are turning what in practical terms is a worthless person into a perfect sacrificial victim. So, although the real act of killing a beloved kin member may confront the sacrificer with the fear and trembling of the dreadful task, it also represents the ultimate act of trickery. The spirits are given what they most desire; yet, in utilitarian terms, the investment comes close to zero. (2013, 150).

By highlighting the aspect of “trickery”, Willerslev recalls an old problem in the study of the interaction between the human world and the invisible world: the fact that it is not always clear who is the direct beneficiary and which world is in control of the other. As Evans-Pritchard argues, paraphrasing Georges Gurdof, sacrifice “is made not only to the gods but against the gods” (1954, 23), implying that the relationship between humans and deities involves not only fear and devotion but also utilitarian intents.

So far, I have written about sacrifice in terms of “killing”, with animals being the typical victims of these actions. However, it has to be noted that sacrificial practices are often part of a wider ritual process which involves not only animals, but the manipulation of other elements. In her critique of Girard’s work — *Violence and the Sacred* — Kathryn McClymond (2008) argues that sacrifice has been wrongly associated to violence, while emic

conceptions that include vegetable and liquid offerings have been neglected by scholars. Girard (1977) argues that sacrifice originates as a performative and ritualized aggressiveness that, if not directed towards the animal, would be maintained within the community. For this reason, the destruction of the *scapegoat* had the function of suppressing the conflicts present within society by deferral — with the transfer of violence from humans to the animal victim. By comparing Vedic and Jewish sources, McClymond argues that sacrifice, in emic terms, does not always include violence or killing, but it may include the “killing” of plants not as a substitute of animals but as legitimate offerings, and does not represent the culmination of the ritual activity. In fact, sacrificial practices are present within the continuum of ritual activity and their scope is not achieved with the killing, but as part of a longer procedure of manipulation of symbolic and material substances (ibid. loc. 675-681).

I have already explained how Candomblé worldview, in terms of McClymond’s argument, contemplates different types of *ejé* — blood — including liquids extracted from animals, plants and minerals. I have also made clear how, besides the different theories previously described, the most explicit and frequent association Candomblecists make when talking about (and performing) sacrifices and offerings is the notion of “feeding”, a notion that is mentioned in other ethnographic accounts (Stewart and Strathern 2014, loc. 1149-1146).

When asked directly, during formal and semi-structured interviews, about animal sacrifice, sacred fathers and mothers give mixed answers which

express not only the idea of feeding and renewing energies but also precise cosmological views:

Babá Egbé: [...] the black man discovered that everything that has life can be taken advantage of [...] you can take advantage of the life essence of that animal for your own benefit. So, before feeding ourselves, we can even use and take advantage of the force of those animals and of their lives. The blood is poured on top of the *assentamento* or *igbá* (*clapping his hands like in the sacrificial ritual*), it is poured, and you pour that and ask for the universe to send you a life, an energy, there is a manipulation of energy, okay?<sup>72</sup>

Pai Odé: Let us talk about the chicken as an offering and not as an *ebó*. If it is an *ebó*, if it is to take something bad away, if it is to free you from a bad thing, we transfer it, we try to pass that bad thing that is in you to the chicken so that the chicken will take it away. So this chicken will go (away) as a whole, it can't be served as a source of food, because it has been offered to take something negative away and to be drawn away, not to be shared. Now, when a chicken is an offering, a form of gratitude, a way to revere the orixás, we have to remember that the orixá does not eat alone. So the orixá likes to eat together with the people, with humans. But he eats the parts that humans do not eat, in practice. Which are the blood, the feathers and some parts like the wings, the head, the feet and the vital organs.

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<sup>72</sup>Baba Egbé: [...] o negro discutriu que tudo o que tem vida pode ser aproveitado e [...] pode aproveitar a essência de vida daquele animal por benefício próprio. Então, antes de nos alimentar-nos, a gente utiliza e aproveita até a força dos animais e a vida deles. É derramado o sangue no assentamento ou igbá, (*batte le mani come nell'oro*) aí é derramado e você derrama aquela vida e pede pro universo te mandar uma vida, uma energia, tem uma manipulação de energia, né?

Nevertheless, in order to be offered to the orixá the chicken is well prepared, with lots of care, and then it is offered to the orixá and shared within the community, as a synonym of fraternization. The orixá shares with the people what has been offered to him.<sup>73</sup>

Tata Kajalacy: It is an exchange. (singing) “whoever gives me food will also eat, whoever gives me water will also drink” - it is an exchange. This is a prayer in Portuguese, there is a prayer in Angola language<sup>74</sup> as well, but I prefer them to sing it in Portuguese for everyone to understand that a plant does not give fruit, does not give anything if you do not pray, if you do not take care of it, this is the exchange that you are making in order to eat its fruit tomorrow. [...] You give in order to receive, or you receive in order to give, I don’t know... it is the same thing.

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<sup>73</sup> Pai Odé: Vamos colocar a galinha como oferenda, não como ebó. Se ela é um ebó, se ela é para tirar uma coisa ruim, se ela é para te livrar de uma coisa ruim, a gente transmite, tenta de passar aquela coisa ruim que está em você para a galinha para que a galinha leve embora. Então essa galinha ela vai inteira, ela não pode ser servida como fonte de alimento, porque ela foi oferecida para tirar uma coisa negativa, a coisa negativa e para ser afastada, não repartida. Agora quando é uma galinha como uma oferenda, como um agradecimento, como uma forma de reverenciar os orixás a gente tem que lembrar que o orixá ele não come sozinho. Então o orixá gosta de comer com o povo, com os humanos. Só ele come a parte que o humano não come, praticamente. Que é o sangue, as penas e algumas partes que são as asas, a cabeça e os pés, e as partes vitais. Mesmo assim para ser oferecido para o orixá é preparado, muito bem preparado, com muito carinho, e depois isso vai ser oferecido para o orixá e a galinha é dividida com a comunidade, sinónimo de confraternização. O orixá divide com o povo aquele que foi oferecido para ele.

<sup>74</sup> Here the sacred father is not referring to the actual language spoken in Angola, but to the ritual language of Bantu origin used in the type of Candomblé *Angola*. Instead, the ritual language of Yoruba origin used in Candomblé *Ketu* is called *Nagô*.

Janaína: When you do not exchange, you pay a price.

T.K.: And your price keeps rising.

J.: Your debt keeps rising. Your debt with the universe.<sup>75</sup>

The three religious leaders associate sacrifice with different things that resonate with the literature I have already mentioned: exchange, manipulation of energy and conviviality. Babá Egbé starts by speaking about the possibility of taking advantage of life energy, Pai Odé's focuses on the idea of sharing food with the orixás and Tata Kajalacy talks about an exchange that is needed in order to avoid an accumulation of debt. While the verbalization of the meaning of a ritual can give rise to contradictory statements, it is interesting to note how the practical descriptions of the rituals are extremely similar. All religious leaders describe the blood being poured on top of the *assentamento*, they mention the presence of non-animal sacrifice (by extracting a special liquid from vegetable or mineral

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<sup>75</sup> Tata Kajalacy: É uma troca. (*cantando*) “Quém me dar do que comer também come, quem me dar de me beber também bebe” - é uma troca. É uma reza em português, tem uma reza também em angola, mas eu prefiro que falem em português para todo mundo entender que uma planta não dá fruto, não dá bosta nenhuma se você não rezar, se você não cuidar, é a troca que você tá fazendo para amanhã comer a fruta dela. Isso é candomblé de angola. Não tem luxuria, têm deveres e obrigações, e a vida é feita disso, se chama troca. E a troca também é um milagre. É difícil você entender, você é de outro país e outra cultura. Mas a troca já é um milagre, é um milagre da vida. Você dá para receber ou recebe para dar, sei lá... é a mesma coisa.

J.: Quando você não troca, você paga um preço.

T.K...: E seu preço vai aumentando.

J.: Sua dívida vai aumentando. A dívida com o universo.



substances) and they explain special correspondences between the orixás and the animals that are offered to them. Yá Paula explains a recurrent scheme in the sacrificial practices called *quatro pés calçados* (for which an approximate translation would be “four feet with shoes”).

Yá Paula: For example, when it is “four feet”, with a ram, if there is the ram there are also four chickens, a guineafowl and a dove, if needed. If there is a goat, four hens, a guineafowl and a dove if needed. The ram will be for the masculine orixá and the goat will be for the feminine orixá.<sup>76</sup>

Tata Kajalacy also mentions this pattern and adds another explanation:

Tata Kajalacy: Now, there is a hierarchy within the sacrifice, like: when you sacrifice an animal that walks on the ground, you need to sacrifice animals that fly, in order to give an energy beyond the earth. [...] So, for each animal with four legs, there must be, if it is male, four cockrels, and if it is female, four hens. However, beyond this, for each animal that you sacrifice, of this type of sacrifice, in addition to the four legs there must be the animals that mean that they will bring this to the height, to the atmosphere, it is an energy that goes to the atmosphere, all energy field is recorded in the atmosphere and beyond the atmosphere. This does not mean that God is in there, no... it means a scientific framework, that energy must stay in a specific point of the universe in order to fight the current negative energy [...] It varies depending on the four legged animal, depending on the *nkisi*, which is what you know as orixá. The *nkisi*, that *nkisi* is goat, that

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<sup>76</sup> Por exemplo quando é quatro pés, com o bode, se é bode são quatro frangos, uma angola e o pombo se for. Se é cabra, quatro frangas, uma angola e um pombo. E aí o bode é para o orixá masculino e a cabra para orixá feminino.

other *nkisi* is sheep, that is armadillo, which is the animal that likes staying underground... Another *nkisi* can be... wild boar [...]<sup>77</sup>

Tata Kajalacy adds interesting elements to the account. He explains that the “feet” of the four legged animals must be complemented with birds that fly high (especially the guineafowl and the dove) in order to bring this energy to a particular point in the atmosphere<sup>78</sup>. In general, we can argue that sacrificial birds, due to their ability to fly, seem to help in the task of connecting the sky with the earth, or the two realms of the visible and the invisible. Moreover, Tata Kajalacy explains a particularity of Candomblé Angola, the tradition he follows, saying that the four legged animal varies depending on the *nkisi* that is going to be fed. However, in my own

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<sup>77</sup> Tata Kajalacy: Agora, existe dentro do sacrifício uma hierarquia, tipo: quando você sacrifica um animal que anda sobre a terra, você precisa sacrificar animais que voem, para dar a energia do além solo. [...] Então, para cada animais de quatro patas, tem que ter se ele for macho, galos, se ele for femea, galinhas. Porém, além disso para cada animal que sacrifique, desse tipo de sacrifício, além das quatro patas tem que ter os animais que signifiquem que vão levar isso para o alto, para a atmosfera, energia que vai para a atmosfera, todo campo energético fica registrado na atmosfera e no além da atmosfera. Isso não significa que Deus está lá, não... significa um quadro científico, que tem que ficar num ponto do universo aquela energia para combater a energia negativa normal [...] Varia mesmo dos bichos de quatro pe que andam, varia de acordo com o *nkisi*, que é o que você conhece como orixá. O *nkisi*, tão *nkisi* é cabra, tão *nkisi* é ovelha, tão *nkisi* é tatu, que é o bicho que procura o subterrâneo. Outro *nkisi* pode ser... javali, tão *nkisi* pode ser o mesmo javali [...]

<sup>78</sup> As it can be observed, interviewees often use terms belonging to the 20th century scientific vocabulary, like “atmosphere”, “energy”, “ecology”. I will analyse in detail the use of this terminology in the following chapter. For now it is interesting to note how recent scientific notions have been integrated into Afro-Brazilian cosmological views as complementary and not contradictory ideas to the religious practice.

fieldwork experience, I have only witnessed the sacrifice of goats and rams among the four-legged animals, clearly the most popular choices. Having said that, there are clear correspondences between the animals that are offered and the deities who will receive the offering: male animals/birds will feed male orixás, while female animals/birds will feed female orixás. However, there are exceptions to the rule. For example, certain masculine orixás like Oxalá or Logunedé, may accept female animals. In fact these patterns should be understood as a general rule to which apply variations. These variations change the details of the ritual practice depending on the orixá, its qualities, its particularities and the characteristics of the devotees who undergo a specific rite of passage. The ritual secret knowledge often lies in the fact of being able to distinguish and perform the rituals in their many variations, modifying the general pattern according to the situation. Of course there is no consensus on when and how to apply different rules, which makes a comparative analysis of Candomblé rituals extremely complicated. Moreover, each Candomblé leader brings his/her own innovations to the practice. An interesting example of this is offered by Yá Paula when talking about the correspondences between the colours of the animals and the orixás. When questioned about the white guineafowl, commonly present in *terreiros*, Yá Paula explains that its function is to feed a certain cluster of deities.

Yá Paula: [...] for me here you give the white guineafowl normally to *funfun* orixás. What is a *funfun* orixá? They are white orixás: Oxalá, Oxaguiã, Yemanjá... they are orixás that do not receive palm oil, they are all white, so we call them *funfun* orixás, so the white guineafowls are for them. But they can also wrap a normal guineafowl

into a [...] white piece of cloth and offer it, you can also do this, otherwise it becomes impossible, today a (white) guineafowl (costs) 150/180 reais, it is absurd, it is very expensive, because it is very rare [...]<sup>79</sup>

Here ritual orthodoxy clashes with more practical problems. As the price of white guineafowls rises and as these birds become less available, common and cheaper guineafowls are covered with a white cloth and their dark feathers are hidden in order to be offered to *funfun* orixás. Indeed, the quality and the number of animals and ingredients to be offered is not only renegotiated according to the circumstances, but also with the deities themselves.

Pai Odé: [...] I cast the shells (divination practice) for you and I say well, Giovanna, you need to undergo a *borí*. Ok. Then I ask you, as it already happened, that you bring me a guineafowl, a chicken, a dove, right? That you bring me an *igbi* (snail). At the moment in which I go there and pray, I am doing [...] I will ask to your orixá which animal of all those he accepts, and he will say if he wants, if he does not want, he may want none of those animals that you brought. It happened already. I need to have them available in order to know what is that your head wants at that moment, but it could also happened that

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<sup>79</sup> Yá Paula: [...] por mim aqui você usa galinha de angola branca geralmente para orixá funfun. O que é orixá funfun? São orixá todo branco: Oxalá, Oxaguiã, Yemanjá... são orixás que não levam dendê, tudo branco, então orixás funfun a gente chama, então as brancas são para eles. Mas nada que um [...] um pano branco, envolva a galinha e que eles também oferte, também pode fazer assim, se não fica inviável, hoje uma galinha de angola 150/180 reais fica muito absurdo, é muito caro, porque é raro mesmo [...]

it wants none of them. Or it may want some more. So everything is to be questioned, you need to understand this.<sup>80</sup>

Clearly the pattern can be renegotiated and the general rule can be modified not only by humans for their practical needs but also by the deities, who express their specific will through divination. Before each offering, the sacred father or mother will ask directly to the orixás which animals are needed to complete the obligation correctly. While the *jogo de búzios* (cowrie shells divination) is performed before the ritual, there are other types of divination that are performed in the middle of the ritual to verify that the deities agree with the ritual procedure. These are normally done with an *obí* (kola nut) or in certain cases with an onion. The *obí* is cut in four parts that are cast on the ground. When all of them fall in the same position, the sacred father or mother calls *alafia* — “open paths”, meaning that the ritual has been prepared correctly and the priest/priestess can proceed the way he/she intended.

The process of substitution and integration already described is reminiscent of the sacrifice of a cucumber instead of an ox among the Nuer. In between the two types of sacrificial victims we can find a variety of substitutes that can be used one for the other when the preferred one is unavailable or

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<sup>80</sup> Pai Odé: [...] eu jogo para você e falo bom, Giovanna, você precisa tomar um borí. Tá. Daí eu peço para você, como já aconteceu, você me traz uma angola, uma galinha, me traz um pombo, né? Me traz um igbi. E na hora que eu vou alí rezar, que eu vou fazer [...] para o seu orixá vou perguntar para ele qual bicho de todos aqueles bichos ele aceita, e vai dizer se ele quer, se ele não quer, ele pode querer nenhum bicho do que você trouxe. Já aconteceu. Eu tenho que ter alí a disposição para saber na hora o que o orí quer, mas pode ocorrer de ele não querer nenhum. Ou pode querer algum mais ainda que não está lá. Então todo é questionado, e você precisa entender essas coisas.

unaffordable. However, ethnographic accounts show that it is also important to take into consideration the agency of non-human and non-visible entities in the process of making, asking and receiving the offering.

The process of interaction, modification, innovation and mediation and is well-explained in the case of Mãe Gilda. Mãe Gilda, in her early seventies, is a sacred mother who runs an Umbanda temple in the northern periphery of São Paulo. She has been initiated in an Umbanda temple which then became a Candomblé house, far from the orthodoxy of traditional and famous *terreiros*. Although she had the *assentamentos* of her orixá prepared and installed, she was not fond of the rigor and aesthetic of Candomblé, therefore she decided to open her own *terreiro* completely dedicated to the practice of Umbanda but, as it often happens, the two religious practices are blurred and mixed in the same space. Mãe Gilda's *terreiro* exemplifies the creativity and innovation in performing the rituals, as there are certain practices that she modified according to her own ideas. Animal sacrifice is one of the things she tries to avoid in her own temple, as she prefers to feed her entities mostly with vegetable food offerings. One night I was attending an Umbanda ceremony at Mãe Gilda's house, when she incorporated her *pombagira*, (a feminine entity similar to Exú), called Margarida. Margarida abruptly interrupted the ceremony and gave a long speech in front of all the people present. She recounted how Mãe Gilda had refused to sacrifice some chickens even after her own sacred mother suggested to do so. Pointing at the body of Mãe Gilda, (the body Margarida was possessing) she said: "I know that this girl, who is not a girl anymore, does not like to "cut" [a slang

indicating animal sacrifice]. But I am already tired to eat *farofa*! [toasted and dry manioc flour]<sup>81</sup>.

Here the distinction between what is dry and what is flourishing with life emerges again. In fact it is the entity herself who asks for the sacrifice to be made and for the *axé*, in the form of animal blood and liquid extract of life force, to be renewed, as she is tired of eating only *comida seca*, “dry food”, such as the *farofa*. In this example, the attempt of Mãe Gilda to modify the rules and prescriptions of the ritual is subverted by an explicit request of her *pombagira* Margarida. By the end of the following week Mãe Gilda gathered her sacred sons and daughters to sacrifice twenty-two chickens to feed all her *assentamentos*.

One of Mãe Gilda’s sacred daughters, Patrícia, made an interesting comment on the situation. She recounts how once she visited a Candomblé *terreiro* and had been struck by the sight of live chickens in the courtyard, as she knew they were going to be slaughtered. After the celebration she went to greet an Exú, who had possessed the body of the priest, and he said to her, “I know that you started thinking about the animals, but let me explain: my ‘horse’ here works very hard [attending clients], until five in the morning. I need energy to work, but if I do not take it from the blood of the animals, I would need to take it from my ‘horse’... and I would leave him exhausted, without any blood left”.

Here the entity not only expresses his willingness to receive the sacrificial blood, but he also gives a formal reason for it. He explains that he works to

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<sup>81</sup> “Eu sei que esta menina, esta moça que já não é uma moça, não gosta de corte. Porém, eu já estou cansada de comer farofa!”

attend the needs of many people by using the body of his ‘horse’, the sacred father who is being possessed by the entity. In order to do so, the entity needs some source of life energy which he takes from the chickens, otherwise he would need to take it from his human. In this case, the entity makes it clear that animal blood is a substitute for human blood, suggesting a possible link between trance possession and animal sacrifice.

Candomblecists also take into account the tastes of non-human invisible entities for other types of food offerings. Each orixá has a set of favourite recipes that are prepared and offered at the moment of the *orô*. For example, Oxossi likes to eat roasted black-eyed peas, but he also likes a dish called *axoxo*, boiled yellow maize decorated with coconut, among many others. Similarly, the most popular dishes to be offered to Oxumaré are a platin cut lengthwise and fried in palm oil, and mashed sweet potatoes with honey. For each *obligation*, the orixá will receive one or two of these dishes, together with the prescribed animals. It is likely that some of these dishes were part of the daily diet of West African descendents, who were offering part of their own meals to the deities. The Afro-Brazilian Museum of São Paulo (*Museu Afro-Brasil*) presents a list of dishes that were popular among enslaved Afro-descendants — like *acarajé*, *caruru*, *xinxin*, *abará*, *ipete* — names that are often heard in the kitchens of Candomblé *terreiros* and that constitute some of the sacred food offerings. As Pai Odé admits, “What is offered to the orixá? Initially people offered what they had [...] if in ancient



times spaghetti had existed and had been offered, there could be today an orixá who likes spaghetti, right?<sup>82</sup>

This interesting example of how the tastes of the invisible world are taken into consideration was brought back into my fieldwork when Tata Kajalacy, during a divination session, told me that an ancestor of mine was acting as an obstacle to my life plans. In order to convince him to leave me alone I needed to make an offering. However, Tata Kajalacy was not sure of what to suggest in terms of what kind of offering I should have prepared. After having pondered different options, he said, “Well, you are Italian... make pasta for him!<sup>83</sup>”. Indeed, it seemed likely to the sacred father that my troublesome ancestor shared my same origins, therefore it was reasonable to suggest that a “pasta offering” would have tamed him.

Some of the dishes that compose Candomblé food offerings are popular, especially in Brazil, and can even be found in specific cookbooks. However, some others are less known by the general public, and jealously kept secret by religious authorities. Babá Egbé argues that those popular recipes have been offered too many times to the orixás and consequently they have lost their communicative power. Conversely, some of the “secret” and less common recipes are used by experienced sacred fathers and mothers whenever they need to trigger an immediate reaction from the deities. By

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<sup>82</sup> Pai Odé: O que é oferecido pro orixá? O povo no início oferecia pro orixá aquilo que ele tinha. [...] não é dito que se em tempo remoto já tivesse o espaguetti, que eles ofereciam e agora não teria um orixá que gosta de espaguetti, pode ser?

<sup>83</sup> Tata Kajalacy: Bom, você é italiana... faça macarrão para ele!

playing with the tastes of the deities and with the *axé* contained in each combination of ingredients, Candomblecists develop the ability to mediate between the desires of the orixás and the needs of humans. Once again, the value of ritual secrecy can be found in the “variations on a theme”, in the details that ritual *recipes* omit and in the interiorized knowledge that can be acquired through lived experience. On the light of these data, it seems that Candomblé rituals, besides involving exchange, food sharing, substitution and manipulation of energy, represent a way of communicating with the invisible world, or as Baba Egbé often repeats, they represent “a dialogue with nature”.

However, this dialogue does not only involve human and invisible actors: in fact, animals’ will is taken into consideration as well. Babá Egbé explains the meaning of a chant through which Candomblecists ask directly to the animal if it wants to take part to the sacrifice.

Babá Egbé: Let’s say one more thing: we do not kill the animal if it does not want, did you know it? We converse with the animal. For example, we say “*lo be ewé ôo*”, take the leaf, we do the *sassanha* [a specific chant that is sung when leaves are used], we dance with the animal for it to calm down and we praise it, we sing and dance for it to calm down [...] until the animal becomes soft and very calm. Then, afterwards, we take the leaf — (singing) “*lo be ewé ôo, l’eran orixá lo be ewé ôo l’eran orixá, lo be ewé, ewere l’onijé berewere ossain, keppa*” - it means ‘killing’ — “*odi*”. If the animal eats from the leaf it accepts death. [...] It is a dialogue, if it does not accept the leaf it is

adorned, prepared and brought to the forest, or it becomes part of the house [...] <sup>84</sup>

Pai Odé also explains a similar procedure and he is particularly critical of those who do not respect the will of the animal. In his experience, some *ogãns* would just take this part of the ritual as a formality and push the leaf in the mouth of the animal. Instead, he argues that the animals acquired for the sacrifice need to rest and to be fed before the ritual in order to be able to express a voluntary choice. However, there are different ways for the animal to express its refusal.

Pai Odé: When the animal starts screaming a lot [...] that is a sign that it is not accepting that, the orixá has different forms of letting us know, there is not one way, there are many ways. Some animals are more resistant, others are not, but those that really do not accept, they let themselves die before being offered to the orixá. So it is very common in Candomblé houses, the animal is there the whole day, active, playing, jumping, eating, running, and when you go and take it for the obligation it dies. [...] Last Thursday, I did an obligation here and I brought three animals. One of them was not in good shape, it looked a bit serious. I did not offer it to the orixá. So it stayed here,

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<sup>84</sup> Babá Egbé: Aí, vamos falar mais: a gente não mata o bicho se ele não quiser, sabia isso? Nós conversamos com o animal. Por exemplo, a gente fala “lo be ewé oo” pega a folha, a gente faz sassanha, a gente dança com o bicho para ele se acalmar e vai louvando ele, cantando a gente vai dançando e acalmando ele [...] até que vai ficando moooole calminho. Aí depois a gente pega a folha “lo be ewé oo, l’eran orixá lo be ewé oo l’eran orixá, lo be ewé, erewere l’onijé berewere ossain, keppa” — é matar — “odi”. Se ele comer da folha ele aceita a morte. [...] É um dialogo, se ele não aceitar a folha, ele é enfeitado, ele é arrumado e até vai ao mato, ou vira filho da casa. [...]

then on Friday I [...] went to São Lourenço. Francesca said: “this animal is going to die.” — “Leave it there, I am not going to offer it to the orixá.” I left it there and on a Sunday it was still alive. Yesterday I set it free in the forest. Because it wasn’t in the conditions of being offered to the orixá.<sup>85</sup>

In a previous chapter I indicated how in Candomblé houses everything and everyone *eats*. The action of eating is often referred to the orixás receiving food offerings, but it also indicates the renewal of energies through the use of different forms of *blood*. In a similar vein, by analysing the ritual process in its details and in its complexity, it could be argued that in Candomblé houses everything and everyone *talks*. In fact, while the act of giving and receiving the offerings represents a communicative action *per se*, Candomblé rituals show how this interaction is implemented with moments of explicit and formalized dialogue with deities, ancestors, animals and humans. The outcome of these dialogues can result in case-by-case modifications, adaptations and improvisations in which Candomblecists

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<sup>85</sup> Pai Odé: Quando o bicho começa gritar muito [...] é uma forma que ele não está sendo, não está aceitando aquilo também, o orixá ele tem várias formas de avisar, não existe uma forma única, têm várias formas. Têm bichos que são mais resistentes, outros não, mas aqueles que realmente não aceitam eles se matam antes de ser oferecidos pro orixá. Então é muito comum nas roças de candomblé, o bicho está o dia inteiro aí ativo, brincando, pulando, comendo, correndo, fugindo, e você vai pegar ele para a obrigação e ele morre. [...] uma quarta-feira, eu fiz uma obrigação aqui e vieram tres bichos. Um não estava bem, estava meio sério. Eu não ofereci ao orixá. Daí ficou aqui, na sexta-feira fui eu, [...] para São Lourenço. A Lores falou “esse bicho vai morrer”. Deixa ele aí, não vou oferecer ao orixá, ele não está em condições de ser oferecido para o orixá. Deixei até o domingo e estava vivo. Ontem estava vivo e soltei ele no mato. Porque ele não estava em condições de ser oferecido ao orixá.

mediate between different worlds: the human world, the realm of the orixás, the energies of material substances and the response of non-human beings. While food offerings and animal sacrifices do not represent the culmination of the ritual activity, they certainly provide a very important example of how rituals and ritualized actions can be the language through which the interaction between humans, non-human beings and invisible entities is formalised.

#### **4.4 *Ejé Xorô*: Ethnography of a sacrifice**

The aim of this section is to compare two ethnographic accounts of the ceremony called *orô*, the ritual in which offerings are presented at the feet of the orixás (in the form of their *assentamentos*) and animal and non-animal blood is shed in order to feed them. My terms of comparison will be the *orô* I witnessed and took part in at Pai Mauro's house in Arborio, Northern Italy and the one at Pai Odé's house in Juquitiba, São Paulo, Brazil. These two accounts of the same ritual will shed light on the differences between the religious and ritual practice in the Brazilian and the Italian ecological and social context. These ethnographic accounts will be complemented by additional data, explanations and interviews I collected during my fieldwork among other interlocutors. This will help to offer a sense of the complexity and multiplicity of ritual variations, of their practice, and of the different meanings associated to them in the wider context of Afro-Brazilian religions.

Once again, some details will be omitted in order to respect the secrecy of the ritual practice.

1. *Festa de Yemanjá and Oxum — 11th-15th June 2015 — Ilê Axé Alaketu Aira — Arborio, Italy.*

In the Italian Candomblé house, ceremonies are normally attended by between ten to twenty-five people. On the occasion I am describing, followers and sacred sons and daughters gather not only to perform the annual rituals and sacrifices for the orixás Oxum and Yemanjá, but also to help with the *obrigação* of two sacred daughters. In fact, Carla of Oxum, an Italian woman in her early fifties, is going through a rite of passage marking her first year of initiation, while Marica of Yemanjá, in her early forties, is going to celebrate her three years within the religion. They are both originally from Piedmont, but while Marica lives in a small town a few kilometres from Arborio, Carla needs to travel for a couple of hours by car in order to reach the *terreiro* from her village. Marica started attending the Candomblé house through her friends Tatiane (Pai Mauro's step daughter) and Sara, who both underwent the initiation almost five years ago. Similarly, Carla decided to join the religious community after being introduced by Guido, an Italian *egbomi* who lives in her same area. They arrive to the *terreiro* on a Thursday and prepare to start the *lavori* - works. Carla talks about how her life changed since the day of the initiation: she found the courage to ask her husband for a divorce and she started a new business with her sister. However, she needs to keep her religious affiliation secret, "If the people in my village knew what I do, they would burn me at the

stake”, she says. Similarly, Marica does not share the fact she is initiated with her family, as “they would not understand”. They dress in white clothes — a blouse, a long skirt and a pair of comfortable trousers underneath, a turban and piece of cloth around their torso called *pano da costa*. Since they are the ones undergoing the ritual, they are not permitted to help with the preparations, which are performed by the sacred mother, a couple of initiates and me. The rest of the devotees will arrive on Friday night.

As usual, the first orixá to be fed before each obligation is Exú. Without his favour all the following offerings would not be delivered to the other orixás.

I help the sacred mother in the kitchen and we prepare the *ebó* for Exú: raw manioc flour mixed with palm oil, water and honey, roasted and boiled black beans, black-eyed peas, white maize porridge wrapped in banana leaves, etcetera. Most of these ingredients are not easy to acquire in Italy and have been bought in African or Asian shops in Novara or Vercelli, two small cities not far from Arborio. Banana leaves are particularly expensive, imported from Thailand or Vietnam, they are kept in the freezer and cut meticulously to avoid waste. The sacred mother instructs me on the quantities of food to prepare. Carla and Marica are still “young” in the religion, so small quantities of food offerings are sufficient. “If they offer a lot of food now, what will they offer on their seventh year?” The seventh year from the initiation marks a sort of coming of age in the Candomblé hierarchy and the portions of food that the orixá receives are expected to increase on that occasion. In the early afternoon, Alessandro, a young man who runs a small farm located at the end of the road, comes to deliver two cockerels. Alessandro is from the province of Milan, but he came to live in

Piedmont to help his father managing his business. In fact, they breed and sell poultry, and they especially sell live birds and eggs to the local inhabitants. Alessandro's farm is also a certified poultry slaughterhouse, but his only customer is a restaurant located in a village closeby. As he admits, the Candomblé house represents a regular source of income for his business, especially since he became good friends with Pai Mauro. Pai Mauro greets him and they spend a few of minutes chatting and joking about their favourite football team, then they formalise the order of livestock for the following days. Afterwards, Pai Mauro places all the food offerings we have been preparing during the morning in the room of Exú, and he also gathers different ingredients on a tray: honey, olive oil, palm oil, *aruá* (a beverage prepared with ginger and cane sugar), salt, water. This tray is called *bandeja dos temperos* in Portuguese, or "seasoning tray", and it is used literally to "season", to complement the sacrificial blood that is poured on the *assentamento*.

Meanwhile, the sacred mother proceeds to wash and prepare the birds one by one. She holds them by the wings with one hand and by the neck with the other. She washes their heads, wings, feet and tail under running water and places them back in a small cage. As soon as she finishes, Pai Mauro calls the start of the *ebó*: all the people present in the Candomblé house go to the room of Exú. Everyone claps the *paó* and Pai Mauro starts chanting. Candomblé chants are normally structured with a leading voice, the one of the religious authority in charge, and a choir of people - the sacred sons and daughters - who answer back. He cuts the kola nut to verify if the Exús appreciate the offerings. When the Exús give their approval the food



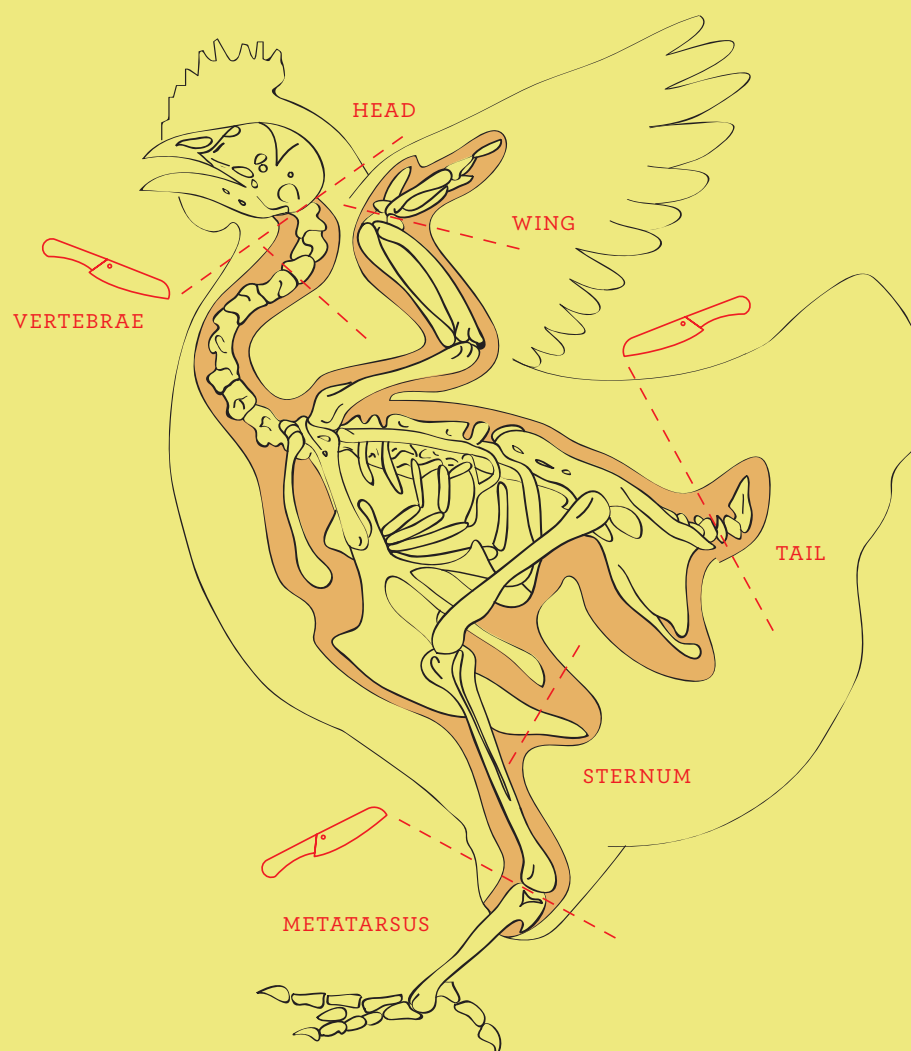
offerings are passed over the bodies of Carla and Marica, then dropped at their feet on a piece of cloth. Pai Mauro starts singing “*Ejé xorô, Exú umpa ô*”. We sing back rhythmically, clapping our hands. In this precise moment, as the word “*ejé*” - blood - is pronounced, the cockerels are slaughtered with a knife, the blood is poured on top of the *assentamento* of Exú and their bodies and heads are placed in a big plastic basin. Afterwards, he takes the seasoning tray and he sings a different chant for each ingredient that he pours on top of the *assentamento*. As usual, not all the ingredients are served to all the entities, and Pai Mauro chooses the ones that are suitable for the particular orixá he is taking care of at the moment.<sup>86</sup> He sings a few more final *cantígas* to close the ritual. Quickly, I follow some *yawós* to the back garden where a large pot of water has been previously put to boil on a camping stove. We take the cockerels from the plastic basin and we begin to pluck them by soaking the feathers in warm and cold water in order to make the process easier. Afterwards, certain parts need to be cut and set aside: the head, the feet, the tail, the wings, a piece of the neck, the point of the sternum, the liver, the heart, the stomach and the testicles. The feet need to be peeled and so does the crest, while the stomach is cleaned of any residual food. We give these parts to the sacred mother, who washes them carefully and cooks them with palm oil and onion. As Exú likes to eat quickly, she argues that these parts do not need to be overcooked, so she soon takes them

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<sup>86</sup> The different steps of the sacrificial ritual happen in the rooms where the *assentamentos* are placed, they are regarded to be secret and are performed and witnessed only by Candomblé seniors. What I am describing here represents a sample of basic ritual actions that is possible to share with a wider public, but it is not an exhaustive and accurate depiction, as some of the steps have been omitted.

## #1 CUTTING THE CHICKEN

Sacrificial animals need to be prepared in a specific way in order to be cooked and served to the orixás (deities) as food offerings. Birds like chickens, guineafowls and doves need to be entirely plucked. Afterwards, the vital organs of the birds, together with some limbs need to be cut off: feet, tail, head, neck, a small piece of the chest and the wings, heart, liver, stomach and genitals, eggs.



CHICKEN SACRIFICE AND ITS PREPARATION IN CANDOMBLÉ RITUAL OFFERINGS



Graphic by Ceclia & Giulia Pignocchi

## #2 PLUCKING, PEELING, CLEANING

Small feathers must be removed from the head and the ears. The skin of chickens' feet, the coriaceous part of the beak and the claws need to be peeled off. Each part is symbolically connected with an aspect of human life and the offering is supposed to propitiate the initiates' spiritual achievements: the feet represent the ability to walk on one's path, the neck represents stability, the tail symbolises the discarding of evil, and so on.

HEART



LIVER



STOMACH



ANY TESTICLES



ANY EGGS



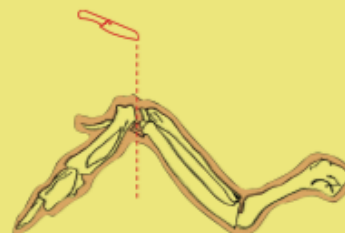
HEAD



VERTEBRAE



WING



STERNUM



TAIL



FEET



CHICKEN SACRIFICE AND ITS PREPARATION IN CANDOMBLÉ RITUAL OFFERINGS



Graphic by Cecilia & Giulia Pignocchi

off the stove and she places the different pieces on two plates made of clay. This preparation is called “making the *axe*”, and consists of extracting all the parts of the bird that are regarded to contain a high percentage of life energy. As a sacred daughter explained to me on a different occasion, each part has a symbolic value that relate to the devotees’ life: the head represents one’s individuality, the feet are to propitiate one’s journey, the tail has the purpose of expelling negativity, the internal organs are filled with blood and life, etcetera. This aspect does not only emerge through symbolic interpretation but also in the practice of the preparation. If a sacred daughter forgets to cut a piece of the neck of the bird, an *egbomi* jokes: “Don’t you want stability in your life?”. Similarly, when someone cuts only the small point of the wings bone instead of the whole joint, an elder says: “Are your hands attached to your shoulders? No, you have the whole arms! That is what you should put in!”. The disposition of the different parts also follows a specific logic. The shape of the bird is reconstructed on the plate: the head is placed on the top, the wings on the sides and the internal organs at the centre, while the feet need to be placed upwards, “just like your feet are facing the front”.

As these details suggest, the animal body and the human body are compared in the preparation of the offerings, as they are compared in some of the *cantigas*, such as the one dedicated to the guineafowl. Here the theme of substitution seems to be grounded not only in the characteristics that humans observe in animal behaviour, but also in the similarities and correspondences between the human and the animal anatomy.

On Friday evening Carla and Marica start their period of seclusion, a typical feature of every *obrigação*. In their case, they have to remain in the *roncó*, the room dedicated to this kind of ritual isolation, until Sunday. The longest period of seclusion is normally the one of the initiation. In the Italian Candomblé house, a *yawó* completes the initiation process in seven days, after which he/she is presented to the community in a public celebration. Afterwards, the novice is meant to keep three weeks of *preceito*, a time of transition in which he/she is allowed to go back to his/her everyday life while abstaining from sex, alcohol and certain food items and while following precise ritual prescriptions like dressing in white clothes, keeping his/her head covered, eating without the use of cutlery, etcetera. The nature of these prohibitions can be analysed using two axes: the *body purity/vulnerability* line and the *juniority* line. Since the devotee underwent a ritual whose aim was to nurture his/her energies, these energies should be preserved as much as possible for a certain amount of time. For this reason, activities that are considered to be polluting or that would put the novice in a state of risk, for example having sexual intercoursés or drinking alcoholic beverages, but also using chemical soaps and cosmetics, are forbidden. Similarly, as streets or crowded places are regarded to gather all kind of negative unknown energies, *yawós* are encouraged to leave their homes only if strictly necessary during their time of *preceito*, and abstain from having contacts with too many people, attending bars or restaurants and being subjected to physical or emotional effort. The second line of prohibitions marks the fact the *yawós* are juniors in the Candomblé hierarchy. In order to be fed, their *assentamentos* have been placed on the ground, and devotees

cannot physically place themselves in a higher positions than their orixás or their seniors in the sacred family. For this reason, during the *preceito* devotees have to sleep on the floor, avoid sitting on chairs and have to eat with their hands.

In most Brazilian *terreiros* the period of seclusion is typically twenty-one days, followed by three months of *preceito*. “Time” is an overly debated topic in Candomblé and the number of days needed to perform rituals has been subjected to changes and adaptations over the decades. Some oral sources argue that originally the period of seclusion lasted for months and some traditional Candomblé houses still extend the time of the *preceito* to a whole year. While many religious authorities defend the position that it is impossible to “make” an authentic *yawó* in fewer than three weeks, many others argue that the shrinking of the ritual time is necessary to the maintenance (or even “survival”) of Candomblé religion. In fact, in a contemporary world in which the notions of “work” and “productivity” are central social values, few people are able to afford being absent from their jobs and families for an extended period of time (Bauman 2004). Therefore, most sacred fathers and mothers are asked to compromise and to abandon the religious orthodoxy in favour of a more pragmatic approach. This process of adaptation started in the Brazilian context and continued unavoidably in the European and American diaspora of Afro-Brazilian religions. Clara Saraiva, in her ethnography of a Candomblé *terreiro* in Portugal, describes similar processes of adaptation, in which not only the period of initiation is shorter but the sacred father avoids shaving the head of his sacred sons and daughters:

The example of the plasticity within such rituals also touches upon other ways of adapting to the new environment. For instance, cult leaders determine that the initiation period must be shortened, so that individuals are not absent from their jobs, or that the need to shave the head of the initiated can be skipped, since individuals would be unable to proceed with their daily lives if this happened [...] (2010, 281-282).

Arnaud Halloy also singles out problems in the managing of time and ritual prescriptions in a Candomblé house that was active in Belgium between 1988 and 2000. The author lists the difficulties that the *terreiro* encountered during its installation in the city of Carnières, among which he indicates the problems of compatibility between the devotees' family commitments and the ritual prescriptions, especially when the relatives are not aware of the specific interdictions that come with the religious affiliation (2004, 457).

The Italian Candomblé house also adopts some modifications, and the period of seclusion, in the case of a simple obligation like the one Carla and Marica are undergoing, often coincides with the span of a long weekend. This period starts with the ritual of the *borí* which I have described earlier in this chapter, to which Tatiane and Sara come to participate after work, as the *borí* is usually performed after dusk. The animals used in this particular ritual are a dove, a white guineafowl and a white hen. Before the sacrifice the birds are washed and afterwards the *axé* is prepared and cooked. After their heads have been “fed”, Carla and Marica spend the night in the *roncó*, sleeping on the straw mat. Meanwhile the rest of the participants prepare a meal for themselves and for the *yawós*, clean and tidy up the kitchen and finally place a few mattresses on the floor of the *barracão* and go to sleep.

On Saturday morning Pai Mauro gives to us a list of food offerings to be prepared for the orixás Yemanjá and Oxum. The list includes, among other things, the *acaçá*, the already mentioned white maize porridge wrapped in banana leaves, the *eboyá*, white maize cooked and stir-fried with oil and onion (a typical dish offered to Yemanjá), and the *omolocum*, black-eyed peas cooked and stir-fried with palm oil, onion, dried shrimps and boiled eggs (one of the favourite dishes of Oxum). At about 11 a.m. Alessandro comes to deliver the animals needed for the big sacrificial ceremony that will be performed in the afternoon. He brings a small white goat, a duck, eight chickens, two guineafowls and a dove. In Pai Mauro's house, goats are offered only when there is an *obrigação* of three years or more, which is the case of Marica of Yemanjá. Therefore, the sacrificial pattern of the "four feet with shoes" seems to be reconstructed: a goat, four chickens and a guineafowl. Conversely, Carla's rite of passage, marking one year from the initiation, will omit the four legged animal and the remaining four chickens, guineafowl and dove will serve to feed Oxum. However, there is one external element, the duck, which needs an explanation. In this case, the duck is the votive animal of Yemanjá, and has been chosen as a special present by Marica. It is not unusual to add personal gifts to the prescribed offerings as an act of special devotion to the deities. Devotees sometimes bring jewelery or shells to adorn the *assentamentos*, offer special animals during their obligations and complement the typical food offerings with cakes, pastries and sweets. The use of food offerings that are more palatable to the devotees than the prescribed recipes previously mentioned is now considered a traditional Candomblé practice. Adding iced cakes, meringues,





Candomblé cakes and decorations ©Giovanna Capponi

and butter biscuits to the food offering table not only represents a devotional practice, but responds to an aesthetic need. Having been historically associated with bloody sacrifice, primitive sorcery and low social classes, Candomblé attempted to subvert this stereotypical image by incorporating baroque and rich elements like finely laced ribbons, inlaid garments and golden decorations to its aesthetic. This process affected also the look and the quality of the food offerings, that are carefully arranged in fine and expensive porcelain, clay or wooden plates dedicated to each orixá, and are often complemented with a tray of sweets or a pudding.

Back in Pai Mauro's back garden, the birds are left in two cages, while the goat is tied to the enclosure with the help of Daniele, an Italian *ogã*n who arrived in the morning. Daniele feels pity for the kid goat, "It is like killing a baby", he says. I help him washing the goat's hooves and horns, while other devotees wash the birds. Finally Pai Mauro calls the start of the *orô*, the ceremony in which the animals and the dishes are offered to the orixás. The

cages with the birds are placed in the corridor, facing the rooms of the orixás, while the goat is wrapped and adorned with a white ribbon around its chest and horns. The *yawós*, *abiáns* and some *egbomis*, (almost ten people in total), kneel on the straw mats in the position of *okunlé* and clap the *paó*, while the sacred mother, the sacred father and the *ogã*n are lead the ritual. The *ogã*n holds the goat in his arms and dances around the barracão, then he stops. One by one, the devotees go to ask the blessing of the animal, they touch the ground and subsequently the goat's head with their forehead. As an Italian *egbomi* explains to me, this action represents a form of delegation: "You thank the animal because it will die instead of you". When everyone has thanked and asked the blessing of the goat, Marica is asked to "mount" the animal and "ride" it until the room of Yemanjá, where the animal will be slaughtered by the *ogã*n. An *egbomi* who underwent the same ritual for his *obrigação* of seven years, comments on her experience: "It felt like I was going to be slaughtered myself!". Again, the animal is considered a substitutive sacrificial victim not only from a ritual point of view, but also from an emotional one. By accompanying the goat towards death, the novice feels as though she is also going to die.

All these actions are accompanied by specific chants, like the one described by Babá Egbé, performed when the animal is asked if it wants to be sacrificed. Indeed, it can be observed that each animal and each action is accompanied by a chant, as a Brazilian *ogã*n joked, "It is like with children, there is a song for everything!". In the meantime, the *yawós* return to the straw mats and follow the ceremony by chanting and clapping their hands. As previously described, the slaughter of the chickens is accompanied by

the chant “*Ejé xorô, Yemanjá umpa ô*” and “*Ejé xorô, Oxum umpa ô*”, depending on the orixá that is fed, while the guineafowls and the doves are slaughtered with the same chants used during the *bori*.

When the animal blood is poured on top of the *assentamentos*, some devotees enter into trance. Some suddenly raise their heads with closed eyes, wobbling their shoulders and even emitting their particular *ilá*, a sound that orixás make through the voices of their devotees. The sacred mother comes to greet the orixás with her *adjá*, a sort of metal sistrum that is shaken to produce a metallic sound. Then, she adjusts the clothes of each orixá according to his/her needs. For example, Oxalá, who incorporated a tall and young sacred son, is bending over like an old man, waiting for his head to be covered with a piece of white cloth. Maria, an Italian *egbomi*, has been incorporated by Oxossi: her *pano da costa* is taken from her body and tied over her left shoulder, signaling the presence of a male orixá, while her turban is arranged around her forehead like a headband. In fact, as soon as the devotee enters into trance, his/her body assumes a new identity, and the orixá who is now present must be welcomed with the appropriate garments and symbols and it is not uncommon to see male orixás vehemently taking off the bracelets, earrings or make-up of their female “horses” as soon as they take their bodies.

As can be observed, the orixás immediately respond to the sacrificial offerings and show their presence through trance possession. In fact, the renewal of the energy installed in the *assentamentos* corresponds to the renewal of the personal life energy of the sacred sons and daughters, for whom the experience of trance possession acts as a reconfirmation of the

bond between humans and deities. This collateral aspect of sacrificial rituals is reminiscent of the myth recounted by Pai Odé, according to which chickens and guineafowls had been created in order to allow the orixás to come back to the *ayíé* through trance possession. However, chickens, guineafowls and other birds do not act solely as a symbolic link between orixás and humans, but are also the material substance of this process of reconciliation. This argument is supported by another detail. The feet, heads and wings of the guineafowls and the doves that are sacrificed, instead of being cooked and offered, are kept in the *assentamento*, then they are let to dry and the bones are crushed to form a type of white powder called *efun*<sup>87</sup>.



Hanging bones (Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, Salvador)

©Giovanna Capponi

This same powder is then kept in a jar and used to paint the novice with the characteristic white spots during the initiation process<sup>88</sup>. In this circle of material substances, the unmaking of birds and the making of *yawós* ceases to be metaphoric, as the feathers, the bones and the blood of birds contribute to the assembling of new beings, both in the human body and in the *assentamento*.

<sup>87</sup> There are, as usual, mineral and vegetable types of *efun* as well.

<sup>88</sup> Patrício Carneiro Araújo, personal communication.

Back in the secret rooms, the sacred father continues performing the *orô* by pouring different ingredients from the “seasoning tray” in the *assentamentos*. Afterwards, he chants a few final *cantigas* that enclose the ritual with the usual clapping of the *paó*. The devotees are awoken from the trance and are asked to pluck and eviscerate the birds. The goat is usually skinned by the sacred father with the help of the *ogãs* and it is eviscerated and cut up in a similar way to the chickens and birds. While the skinning of the goat is performed by men, its stomach and its intestines need to be cleaned by a woman, preferably a daughter of Oxum or Yansã. Similarly, the duck needs to be plucked by a woman and in complete silence.

It needs to be noted that the preparation, plucking and evisceration of the animals is not considered a pleasant activity by most Candomblecists. While preparing and separating the *axé* contained in the birds, the social actors engage in conversations that often revolve around the distastefulness of the action they are performing. As the sacred mother sums up, “In my house I do not even eat chicken, but here... here we do things that we would never do in our lives!”. In these situations, Candomblecists also share the most effective techniques to pluck and cut, but also talk about their memories or experiences of interacting with animals in a rural context. It is interesting to note that the initial feeling of unpleasantness is often replaced by the acknowledgement that domestic production and consumption of meat was a common practice until the Post-World War II economic transition in Italy. Indeed, historical sources argue that in the middle of the twentieth century, rural areas of the country maintained some of the characteristics of the *peasant society*: a low-scale production model, family-centred farms and

pockets of self-consumption in the Southern part of the country and in the Po Valley region (D'Atorre and De Bernardi, 1994). During the ritual practice of separating the *axé*, it is common for the Italian Candomblecists to mention their family memories in which poultry meat was produced and consumed within the domestic walls and sometimes to share traditional recipes which employ parts of the birds that would be nowadays discarded<sup>89</sup>.

In his famous culinary manual published in 1891 (*Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well*) — one of the first cookbooks presenting a comprehensive description of Italian gastronomic culture — Pellegrino Artusi mentions a recipe entirely prepared with chicken giblets.

When you add the necks, heads, and feet to chicken giblets, they become the homely dish that everyone is familiar with. But when you want to make it more refined, using only the livers, combs, unlaied eggs, testicles and gizzards scalded in broth and without the gristle, you can make it more flavourful and delicate by preparing it in the following way. [...] (Artusi 2004, 264)

This piece of historical gastronomy demonstrates how the notions of taste, edibility, and familiarity are contextual. By remembering the tastes and the dynamics of production and consumption of a (often imaginary) rural past, Italian followers of Candomblé reinterpret the ritual activity (which is considered unpleasant and exotic) into a more comfortable and familiar sphere of meaning.

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<sup>89</sup> Interestingly, one well-known Piedmontese recipe is a “risotto” prepared with the crests of cockrels.

Indeed, once the different parts of the bird are separated, they are washed and given to the sacred mother or to an *egbomi*, who cooks them according to the taste of the orixá: with onion, palm or olive oil, sometimes also salt and dried shrimps. Once cooked, they are placed in a special plate dedicated to the orixá (white porcelain in the case of Yemanjá and Oxum) who is going to receive the offering, and arranged as already explained. The rest of the meat is cut and stored in a large freezer in the kitchen of the Candomblé house, or cooked in a variety of fashions that best respond to the tastes and culinary habits of the participants (for example the chicken can be roasted or used to make a chicken salad or a curry). However, some of the meat is obligatorily used to feed the two *yawós* who are undergoing the rite of passage, and who are subjected to a particular diet. In fact, during the time of their seclusion, they are fed only with chicken or fish *pirão* (a stew thickened with manioc flour), and certain types of tubers and fruit.

Carla is a vegetarian, and she often complains about having to eat meat at the *terreiro*. However, since the meat belongs to those animals that have been offered to the orixás, she cannot object, as the meat is supposed to have acquired beneficial properties in the process. Sabrina, a Portuguese woman in her thirties, became a vegan soon after being initiated into Candomblé. In a similar way to Carla, the *terreiro* is the only place where she eats meat. As she explained to me once, “I look at the food and I thank the chicken that died for me.” Vegetarianism and awareness of meat consumption are growing trends in Europe. These dietary choices often represent a political critique of the capitalist modalities of meat production, but they are also configured as part of a lifestyle focused on health and body purity. It is

interesting to note how the consumption of meat coming from sacrificial animals is interpreted by people following certain dietary choices. In these cases, the meat of sacrificial birds not only changes its properties (as it is filled with *axé*), but somehow maintains the individuality of the being that has been offered. This interpretation lacks more consistent ethnographic data, but it can help explaining how ritual slaughtering escapes the logic of normal food consumption and production.

The process of transformation from food to offering also involves other dishes that have been prepared for the *orixás*. After being offered, the food is called *axé*, it needs to stay at the feet of the *assentamentos* overnight<sup>90</sup>, and Candomblecists are encouraged to eat it so as to share the food with the deities. However, the *axé* must be consumed in a particular way. It must be distributed on a metal plate and eaten with one's hands while sitting on a straw mat. The sharing of the *axé* is not a codified or compulsory ritual action (although it contains ritualized elements) in the Italian Candomblé house, as the food offerings — often composed by beans or tubers fried in palm oil or olive oil, saltless porridge or chicken giblets — do not correspond to the tastes of Italian devotees. Those who wish to eat the *axé*, enter in the rooms of the *orixás* and fill their metal plates with some of the offerings and some fruit.

Marica and Carla remain in ritual seclusion until the day after, in which the public celebration — called *candomblé* — is held. During the morning, the elders clean the *assentamentos* and the main room is adorned with golden

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<sup>90</sup> In some Candomblé houses I visited, like the Axé Ilê Oba of São Paulo, food offerings stay at the feet of the *orixás* for at least a week.



and silver ribbons. At around 3 p.m. guests start gathering in the *barracão* waiting for the ceremony to start. In the Italian *terreiro* guests attending the public celebrations number between thirty to fifty people, of whom half are Brazilians who live and work in Italy, and the other half are Italian sympathisers and often clients of Pai Mauro or Pai Odé.

Candomblecists dress up with finely laced clothes, starched skirts and voluminous turbans, normally displaying the colours of the orixás that are celebrated — Yemanjá and Oxum in this case. The *candomblé* is a public ceremony that closes the rituals and it normally takes place the day after the *orô*, but it can also be postponed until the following week. In the scenario of the *barracão*, guests sit close to the walls and Candomblecists start dancing in circle and chanting to the sound of the *atabaques*. Drum-players must be men and it is common to invite Brazilian musicians to play at the *terreiro*, since learning the complex rhythmical patterns of Candomblé is a very difficult task for Italian devotees due to a lack of exposure and the low frequency in which such ceremonies are held.

The first part of the ceremony is called *xiré* and is a fixed sequence of chants and dances where all the orixás are mentioned and honoured. The second part is called *rum*, and it is the moment in which the deities possess the bodies of the sacred sons and daughters and manifest themselves to the public. The orixás are then dressed in their garments and symbols and brought back to the main room where they continue dancing, as a way of spreading and sharing their *axé* to the public, and occasionally greeting the guests with codified bows, hugs, and gestures. In this case, trance possession has the aim of distributing and moving the sacred energy from

the secret rooms to the public environment. In this ritual ceremony, the energy that has been cultivated and renewed during the previous days is released and shared with sympathisers and outsiders, as the power of secret and sacred knowledge cannot maintain its influence if it is not occasionally revealed in codified and collective events. At about 7 p.m., when the celebration is over, all the devotees who entered into trance are woken up and the guests are served a meal, often including the meat of the sacrificed chickens, that has been previously prepared. This moment of conviviality is called, *ajeum* (literally “meal”, which is also the word devotees pronounce before eating). Some of the regular guests also bring food, like *empadas* (savory pastries filled with meat, fish or palm hearts), cakes or sweets.

In one interview, Pai Odé recalls the tradition of the *mesa fria* (‘cold table’), the habit of sharing and eating the offerings with the whole community of devotees and sympathisers the day after the *orô*. Nowadays, Candomblé *terreiros* rarely serve the food of the *axé* to outsiders who come to attend the public celebrations<sup>91</sup> and tend to prepare more refined and appealing meals, like *feijoadas* or meat stews with rice and vegetables. When the guests leave, Carla and Marica perform some final rituals which close their obligations, and are free to leave the Candomblé house after having helped to clean and tidy up the place.

## ***2. Festa de Yemanjá and Oxum — 2nd-5th December 2015 — Ilê Axé Alaketu Odé Tolá — Juquitiba, São Paulo.***

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<sup>91</sup> During my fieldwork, only the *Axéloyá* of Salvador de Bahia served the food of the offerings to external guests.



Ilê Axé Alaketu Odé Tolá, Juititiba. ©Giovanna Capponi

Pai Odé's *terreiro* is located in a remote area between Juititiba and São Lourenço da Serra, 70 km from the city of São Paulo and it is surrounded by a dense patch of Atlantic Forest. This area stands on the borders of the Serra do Mar State Park, one of the largest continuous areas of Atlantic Forest of the country. The house is divided into three parts: a small two-room house where sacred sons and daughters sleep and leave their personal belongings; Pai Odé's personal house; and the area of the *barração*, which gives access to some of the rooms of the orixás and a large kitchen through a wide porch. The outside area (the forest space, as Juana Elbein dos Santos would call it), about a hectare is developed, there are about ten small shacks where some *assentamentos* are kept, a big fenced coop where chickens and other animals can be temporarily hosted, a sort of deforested courtyard surrounding the main building and a wide portion of garden (which would fit the definition of 'homely wilderness' developed by Descola) in which some *assentamentos* are placed *en plein air*, covered by thick vegetation. The

*terreiro* is also close to a small waterfall and a pond, which happens to be an important feature to perform certain rituals.

The rituals for Oxum, Yemanjá and Logunedé are scheduled to start on the 2nd of December, immediately after the celebrations for the orixás of the Kerejebe cluster, which took place the previous week. Therefore, some sacred sons and daughters have been staying in the Candomblé house for the whole period in which the rituals are taking place. Some forty people are already present on Wednesday 2nd of December and they are busy preparing the offerings for the *ebó* of Exú which will take place in the late afternoon. In fact, on this occasion five sacred sons and daughters will undergo their *obligations*: Mãe Vanessa of Oxum (early fifties) and her biological daughter Thais of Oxum (twenty) will celebrate their twenty-one years within the religion, Pai Robson of Oxossi (early thirties) will take his *axé* of fourteen years, Rafaella of Yawá (early twenties) will celebrate her seven years, and Lucas of Oxossi (mid-twenties) will mark his three years since the initiation.

Mãe Vanessa joined Candomblé at a time of her life in which she was trying to have a baby. She had performed different offerings to Oxum, the goddess of fertility, but her sacred father had told her that Oxum wanted her head, her initiation, in order to grant her this favour. Vanessa then decided to undergo the initiation, but she became pregnant before the time of seclusion. As a result, her daughter Thais underwent the whole ritual process in her mother's womb, becoming a *yawó* of Oxum before the time of her own birth. For this reason Thais is celebrating her twenty-one years within the

religion, while being only twenty years old. Her biological father is also a sacred son of Pai Odé and he is taking part in the rituals.

Pai Robson is a young man and son of Oxossi who already opened his own *terreiro* located in Mariporã, a municipality of the metropolitan area of São Paulo, and he is the sacred father of his own community, the Ilé Alaketu Asé Odé Laburè. In fact, seven years of experience within Candomblé religion are enough to start one's own community and to initiate other people, granted the permission of the oracle and the person's will to pursue this enterprise. However, he always needs to refer to an elder like Pai Odé to feed his own head and orixá. The two communities — Pai Odé's and Pai Robson's respective sacred sons and daughters — happen to attend each other's *terreiros* relatively without frictions, as they perceive themselves to be part of the same extended sacred family. In fact, some people belonging to Pai Robson's community are participating in this celebration.

Rafaella or Yewá, who is going to celebrate her seventh year and to become an *egbomi*, an elder, at the end of her obligation, is also surrounded by some of her biological family. Her older sister is an *equede*, her younger brother and her husband are also part of the community and her little daughter was initiated when she was one year old. It is common to see young children roaming freely in Candomblé houses and there is a debate whether or not to initiate them at a young age. At this celebration there are three small children aged between two and three years who play around the *barracão*, and they all have been initiated at the request of their parents, who are also part of the religious community. Another sacred son, Pedro of Oxossi, recalls how he experienced his time of seclusion in the *roncó* during his

initiation together with his little biological son who was one year old. The initiation of children is often seen as a strategy to make their time of *preceito* easier and to accelerate their apprenticeship. Moreover, this shows how the ties between the sacred family and the biological family often intertwine. This aspect is probably the most evident difference that can be noticed between the notion of Candomblé identity and belonging in the Brazilian and in the Italian context. As already mentioned, Italian followers often hide their religious belonging from their own family members, who would perceive Candomblé practices as too exotic or even dangerous. Conversely, the Brazilian case study shows that the religious choice can be perceived as a widely accepted belief system within the extended social group<sup>92</sup>.

Lucas of Oxossi is also attending the ceremony with his biological mother Dona Núria, who is also the leader of another *terreiro*. However, the rite of passage he is undergoing is not simply an event to mark his third year within Candomblé, but also his introduction into a new community. In fact, Lucas and Dona Núria were initiated in another Candomblé house, but they decided to change sacred father and become part of Pai Odé's family. While Dona Núria already formalized this process, for Lucas this is one of the first occasions in the new *terreiro*. Changing one's religious leader is another common feature in Candomblé, usually occurring as a result of arguments or

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<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, conflicts between family members who belong to different religious groups are not rare, especially since the asperities between Neopentecostal churches and Afro-Brazilian religions became common both in the media and in politics (Silva 2005, 216-217).

conflicts between the religious authorities and their followers. Lucas is preparing to become officially part of the Ilê Axé Alaketu Odé Tola, a process which hands to Pai Odé the responsibility of feeding and taking care of his orixá.

Given the number of people present at Pai Odé's house, the more experienced sacred sons and daughters cover a specific role — called *cargo* — which makes them responsible for specific tasks such as managing the kitchen, playing the drums, taking care of the *assentamentos* of Exú, etc. This is a common strategy for the religious authority to delegate responsibilities but also for some elders to acquire more prestigious roles within the hierarchy. The *ebós* for Exú are prepared and performed smoothly by mid-afternoon, involving four black cockerels and one black hen. The *yawós* of the house proceed to pluck them and clean them, while the *axé* is cooked by the *egbomis* who are in charge in the kitchen. The development of the rituals and the chants are very similar to those witnessed in Pai Mauro's Candomblé house, but both the social organization and the ecological aspects are very different. For example, most of the ingredients used for the offerings can be bought in the local supermarket of São Lourenço and the expensive banana leaves that Italian Candomblecists store in the freezer can be harvested fresh and for free from the trees in the forest. Moreover, as the *terreiro* is located in a remote area, most rituals can be held at night without fear of disturbing neighbours. It is the case of the *borí* of the five sacred sons and daughters previously mentioned, which takes place on Thursday at 2 a.m.. Pai Odé gathers all his sacred family in the *barracão* to discuss and highlight the problems he noticed during the day in the

community. Then he starts performing the *borí* while all the *yawós* wait in the position of *okunle* on the straw mats. As usual, I position myself at the very end as an *abian*. During the *borí*, three doves, four guineafowls, three chickens and one *igbin* are used. The *igbin* is the Yoruba name for the Giant African Land Snail, a large gastropod mollusk is used in some culinary preparations in West Africa, while it is sold solely for ritual purposes in South America, and it is usually sacrificed to Oxalá. Due to the unavailability of this particular species, which is also considered very invasive for the ecosystem, the Italian Candomblé house employs common land snails that can be collected in the garden. In both contexts, snails differ from chickens and goats as they are not considered edible by the devotees, therefore they are cooked and prepared for the orixás but not shared within the community. However, this type of *ejé* — blood — is considered particularly powerful, as it evokes the energy of Oxalá, one of the most respected and important orixás of the pantheon. As Fernando of Omolu, a young *yawó* who just celebrated his first year within the religion, warns me, “When they sacrifice the *igbin*, everyone *vira*” (literally “turns”, a slang to indicate when someone enters into trance). Indeed, as Pai Odé proceeds to the immolation of the snail, all the *yawós* in the rooms are possessed by their respective orixás. When the *borí* is finished, the *yawós* are woken up as usual and are ordered to clean and prepare the *axé* of the animals. The whole preparation ends at around 5 a. m., when the young devotees place some mattresses in the *barracão* and go to sleep, while most *egbomis* went to rest a few hours before. The internal division of labour highlights privileges and responsibilities on the spatial axes I described at the beginning of the



chapter. The kitchen and the rooms of the orixás, the domains of secret knowledge and manipulation of *axé*, are mostly reserved for elders, while juniors are expected to perform more humble tasks, such as keeping the space in order, washing the dishes and plucking and eviscerating the animals. As in the Italian context, this procedure is not considered pleasurable. However, while in the Italian Candomblé house this action is performed by most sacred sons and daughters regardless of their hierarchical position (especially due to the low number of participants in general), in the Brazilian one it is clear that this type of work is a social marker within the internal structure of the sacred family. As Fernando complains to me while plucking a chicken, “This is the life of a *yawó*, you wash the dishes, you clean the animals...”. On a different occasion, referring to a situation in which the number of animals to be cleaned was greater than normal, a woman with a high position in the hierarchy said: “There was so much to do that even I had to pluck chickens”<sup>93</sup>.

The following morning, *yawós* wake up at around 11 a. m. while the *egbomis* in charge of cooking woke up earlier and prepared a large amount of food, sweet corn cakes, bread, cheese, coffee and tea, for breakfast. The hierarchy is also expressed in the order in which people serve themselves at the table. When Pai Odé arrives he sits at the head of the table, and his closest *egbomis* sit together with him. When all the elders have served themselves, *yawós* can take the food that is left and consume it with their hands, sitting on straw mats on the floor.

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<sup>93</sup> “Tinha tanto para fazer que até eu limpei galinhas.”

After breakfast devotees start preparing the offerings for the *orô* which will take place at night. While some people prepare the offerings for Oxum, Yemanjá, Logunedé and Oxossi, others go to collect leaves to prepare herbal baths or for other ritual purposes. Meanwhile, more sacred sons and daughters reach the Candomblé house to participate in the event, reaching a peak of sixty to seventy people. At around 4 p.m. Pai Odé's trusted livestock seller comes to deliver the animals that will be sacrificed in the following days. At 7 p.m., when the offerings have been cooked and everything is prepared, Pai Odé calls the start of the *orô*. As usual, all the *yawós* and some *egbomis* participate in the ritual by kneeling on the straw mats in the position of *okunle*, while some elders and some *ogãns* and *equedes* in charge help with the actual sacrifice. On this occasion, Logunedé receives one dove, one guineafowl and two chickens; Oxum is offered one goat, eight hens, two guineafowls and two doves, while twenty-four chickens and two goats are sacrificed to Oxossi. Given the large number of people and animals involved, to the secrecy of the practices and to different variations of the ritual, it is impossible to indicate a precise correspondence between each set of animals and each of the devotees who were undergoing the rite of passage. However, it can be noted that goats are always offered as part of someone's rite of passage, and also in this case Oxossi and Oxum receive goats as part of the offerings. As usual, during the process most devotees enter into trance, and Lourenço, one of the *egbomis* who are helping to bring the animals from their cages to the rooms of the orixás is also possessed by his orixá, Oxossi. Lourenço, who is now Oxossi, keeps helping to bring the chickens in the *barracão*, and starts giving them to the *yawós* on the straw

mats, some of them also into trance, for them to secure the birds before the sacrifice. Oxossi, emitting a particular tweeting-like sound, gives a chicken to the person on my right, Fernando, who is now incorporated by Omolu. Then he comes back to me and hands me a bird, which I grab by the neck and the wings as I have been taught. This particular situation shows that sometimes the rituals depend on the physical help and participation of the deities themselves. Moreover, it is not rare to hear stories of sacred fathers and mothers who call the orixás to possess the bodies of the *yawós* at the moment of cleaning, plucking and cutting the birds in order to make the process faster. In fact, it seems that the orixás can perform these tasks in a quick and precise way, since they are practically preparing their own food.

This data could be analysed from different angles. Firstly, it could be argued that, through the sacrificial animals, deities and humans come together and contribute to the nourishment of both groups, collaborating as part of a united society. This aspect is highlighted by the discourses of conviviality of Pai Odé and the accounts recalling a mythical past in which humans and deities lived together. However, the co-substantiality between sacrificial birds and novices that has been previously hinted at, is here replaced by a co-substantiality between deities and humans, or between the *spiritual double* and the Candomblecist that is possessed by him/her. It is often said that orixás in trance need to be trained and to learn how to adjust to the body of their *horses*, but it is also clear that some kind of ritual, codified and situated knowledge is decanted from the deity to the human body. This emerges also in other cases, where interlocutors argue that their orixás make them able to do things they would not be able to do, such as jumping,

dancing or moving in a certain way. This process of transferral of energy, skills and knowledge from an invisible to a visible body recalls again the topic of the cyborg: during the sacrifice, what was almost inert becomes vivified and what was alive becomes a container of another form of life. The German philosopher Edmund Husserl coined an interesting distinction between the body as a container - *Körper* - and the lived body - *Leib*. While *Körper* refers to the body as an object or representation, the notion of *Leib* describes a body with a subjectivity that is fully experienced and *in-the-world*, to borrow a term from phenomenological philosophy. This distinction must not be interpreted as completely dychotomic, but as two phases or shapes of bodily experience. With the help of these suggestions, I would like to approach these data from a perspectivist point of view (Viveiros de Castro 1998). In fact, from the perspective of the orixás it could be argued that the *assentamento*, which has been described as a material representation, becomes *Leib* when it is vivified with blood(s), feathers and other ingredients, reaching the fullest of its expression, while the human body becomes *Körper*, an object and container that can be filled with energy, movements, knowledge.

However, the actual triangulation between invisible actors, humans and animals is reached during the rite of passage itself, because both the *assentamento* and the head of the novice are touched by animal blood and covered in its feathers, both energies are renewed and the animal becomes food for both. As Pai Mauro tried to explain to me once, “The chicken is the switch!”, meaning that the sacrificial animal is the connection and the trigger of the process of making human and supernatural bodies. This

intricate range of possible relations between humans, sacrificial animals and deities compels me to mention the work of Viveiros de Castro who, in his theory about Amerindian perspectivism, observes how in the Amerindian world, spirits or animals perceive humans differently from how humans perceive them. Viveiros de Castro points out that not all animal species are part of these observations, but only those who play a significant role in myths or that have some sort of recurrent relation in people's daily life or in their imaginary. Moreover, the author argues that, opposite to the nature-centrism of Western thinking, Amerindian or 'animic' thought tends to model nature after its social structures: the body is not a *unicum* that can be represented in different cultural ways, but it is the *spirit* that is in common to all natural and supernatural species, and that can acquire a multiplicity of bodies.

The human body can be seen as the locus of the confrontation between humanity and animality, but not because it is essentially animal by nature and needs to be veiled and controlled by culture (Rivière 1994). The body is the subject's fundamental expressive instrument and at the same time the object *par excellence*, that which is presented to the sight of the other. It is no coincidence, then, that the maximum social objectification of bodies, their maximal particularization expressed in decoration and ritual exhibition is at the same time the moment of maximum animalization (Goldman 1975: 178; Turner 1991; 1995), when bodies are covered by feathers, colours, designs, masks and other animal prostheses. (*ibid.* 480)

Back in Pai Odé's *terreiro* the rituals proceed as usual, after which the goats are skinned by the *ogãns*, the birds are plucked and eviscerated by the

*yawós* and some *egbomis* while the *axé* is cooked and prepared by elders in charge of the kitchen with the help of some *yawós*.

On the following day another set of ritual sacrifices is scheduled, this time for Oxum and Yemanjá. As usual, two cockerels are sacrificed for Exú during the day, then the food offerings for the Oxum and Yemanjá are cooked. The *orô* starts late in the evening, with similar dynamics to those previously described, Oxum receiving three goats, three chickens and two guineafowls, while Yemanjá receiving just four chickens and one duck. At the time of performing the sacrifice for Yemanjá, something unusual happens. The devotees who are kneeling on the straw mats do not go into trance. Suddenly, Pai Odé stops the rituals and walks in the barracão shouting and reproaching his sacred sons and daughters, “I do not understand why the other orixás do not come to greet such an important orixá like Yemanjá!”. The sacred sons and daughters look puzzled, some comment between themselves, “If my orixá does not come, I cannot close my eyes and pretend!”. Pai Odé then starts agitating the *adjá* and the devotees are finally possessed by their respective orixás. This event shows how orixás are expected to participate to the rituals and that they can sometimes be encouraged, called and even reproached if they do not manifest themselves. At the same time, sacred sons and daughters are somehow regarded as responsible for this happening, despite the fact that trance possession is not considered something that can occur because one wants it. As previously stated, the recurrent feature of these relationships between deities and humans is that it is not entirely clear which group is in control of the other. I would argue instead that it is not a matter of control but of communication,

as each group communicates with the other by asking, calling, allowing, but also filling, renewing and feeding. At the end of the *orô*, the animals are prepared and cleaned as usual and the cooked offerings are placed at the feet of the *assentamentos*. The following day is the day of the *candomblé* and many guests are expected to attend the celebration. Candomblecists dress with fine printed fabric clothes and voluminous skirts showing lace edges while guests arrive. The *xirê* starts at around 6 p.m., and continues until 11 p.m. During the celebration small portions of food offerings are offered to the guests. Pai Robson is possessed by his particular quality of Oxossi, called Odé Laburé, who represents the hunter who brings food and prosperity to the household. He dances carrying a basket of fruit on his head and starts distributing pieces of fruit to all the people present in the room<sup>94</sup>. At the end of the *candomblé* a meal consisting in chicken stew, beans, rice and vegetables is served to participants and guests.

In the previous section I tried to describe two similar rituals in two different settings. As it has been observed, one of the most relevant differences between the two case studies concerns the number of people participating in the rituals and the number of offerings that are prepared and of animals that are sacrificed. However, interesting differences also involve the availability of ingredients, the ways of provisioning, the organization of the sacred space, the perception of hierarchy and division of labour in the two Candomblé *terreiros*. Moreover, cultural perceptions of what is palatable,

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<sup>94</sup> In Tata Kajalacy's Candomblé house a similar ritual involved the distribution of fruit and maize.



A son of Xangô is possessed by Oxum for the first time

Ilê Axé Alaketu Odé Tolá (Juquitiba) ©Giovanna Capponi

tasty and edible shape the ways in which food offerings are prepared and shared within the community. In both cases, chickens are considered the favourite source of food and energy for both deities and humans both on a practical and symbolic level, while other animals and birds are regarded



more or less suitable for human consumption; the dark meat of guineafowls is considered a delicacy in Italy, while it is less common in Brazil. Goat meat has a strong flavour that is generally not appetizing for people coming from urban and industrialized areas, while it is a common type of meat in the North-East of Brazil and in rural areas. Other animals, such as the *igbin*, are offered to the orixás but do not find a place in the diets of Candomblé practitioners neither in Brazil nor in Italy. Moreover, while it has been commonly argued that the orixás eat all the parts of the birds that humans do not eat, it has been shown that the practice of cooking and eating chicken feet, heads and giblets is embedded in the personal memories of Italian Candomblecists, who reinterpret the ritual practice by remembering an imagined rural past. Conversely, Brazilian Candomblecists perceive this task as an indicator of a precise status of juniority, being in a setting in which the internal social structure follows rigid rules and food is distributed giving precedence to the elders.

#### **4.5 From the victim's point of view: final thoughts on death and substitution**

As previously mentioned, Candomblé rituals are characterised by a series of rites of passage that mark the journey of the novice along the hierarchy of the religious community. Indeed, the widespread metaphors of feeding and renewing are paired with the ideas of growth and evolution, involving both a general idea of spiritual evolution and a pragmatic acquisition of secret ritual knowledge. In practical terms, it has been observed how the quantities of ritual offerings increase together with the “sacred” age of the person,

which often involves also a higher number of animals to be offered or the presence of four-legged animals like goats, complemented by four chickens, one for each leg, and a guineafowl. This pattern has been described to me by the anthropologist and sacred father Patrício Carneiro Araújo, as a sacrificial “pyramid”. This terminology does not emerge explicitly in the emic discourses around sacrificial practices, nevertheless the pyramidal visual representation is the one that better explains the sequence in which these animals are offered under the common expression “four feet with shoes”: four chickens to form the sacrificial base, a goat that is sacrificed “on top” whenever someone undergoes a rite of passage, a guineafowl and a dove that, as it emerged in the interviews, have the ability to fly high and to bring the life energy to the *orum*, the world of the orixás. I am comparing this idea with the artistic representation of the orixás in the work of the famous Brazilian artist Carybé. His most famous pieces of art, housed in the Afro-Brazilian Museum of Salvador, are big wooden panels in which representations of the orixás are carved together with their respective votive animals. The artistic composition places the orixás in the higher part of the panels, while the animals are at the bottom. The panel that most resonates with the pyramidal structure I am trying to describe is the one dedicated to Ossaim, in which the deity is represented standing with just one leg on top of a cockrel, which also is standing on top of a ram. By analysing this work, Vagner Gonçalves da Silva argues:

These animals, that are the favourite food of Ossaim, are represented in the act of sustaining the deity, who has just one leg [...]. It is

significant to note the number of legs represented (4, 2, 1) to “sustain”, in its double meaning, this mythical vision. (2012, 5)<sup>95</sup>

Indeed, Juana Elbein dos Santos (2002, 133) argues how conic shapes are recurrent features in Candomblé symbols, as she puts in relations objects like a particular conic shell used for Exú, the *osuu*, the conic artefact that is placed on top of the novice’s head during the initiation to mimic the helmeted guineafowl, and even the crowns of Nigerian kings, which traditionally had a conic shape. Dos Santo’s analysis of the cone as a symbol of dynamic evolution proves to be an exemplary exercise of French structuralism, nevertheless it is useful to highlight the importance of the idea of growth and increase in Candomblé. While my own data do not show explicit correspondences between different conic elements, it is clear that some ritual symbolic actions relate to an idea of growth that can be represented visually by a triangular or pyramidal shape. It is the case of some ritual offerings like the *acaçá*: in its preparation, the white maize porridge needs to be wrapped in banana leaves when it is still hot, and it needs to be pressed and molded in a particular way so that, when the porridge becomes solid and cold, it can be unwrapped, obtaining a small pyramidal shape. Similarly, other offerings like beans or manioc flour are poured the at the centre of a plate in order to form a small heap. Taking into

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<sup>95</sup> “Estes animais, por serem as comidas prediletas de Ossaim, aparecem sustentando a divindade que tem apenas uma perna (o corpo assume, inclusive, a forma de uma “árvore”: a perna torna-se o tronco e a parte superior do corpo a copa coberta pelas diferentes folhas dos orixás). É significativo o número de pernas representadas (4, 2, 1) para “sustentar”, no duplo sentido, essa visão mítica. “



*Açaçá* offering. Ilê N'Zambi, Caraguatatuba. ©Giovanna Capponi

account the idea of ritual as a communication device, I would like to argue that the employment of pyramidal and conic symbols in Candomblé offerings work as a signal to inform the deities that evolution and growth are the ultimate goal of the ritual action: the food is offered with an implicit reminder of what humans would like to receive in exchange.

It is important here to recall all the elements that create regimes of correspondences between what is sacrificed, the sacrificer and the orixá who receives the sacrifice. The sex, colour and age of the animals are chosen in order to match the preferences and the deity. However, the ritual practice shows important connections between the animals and the sacrificers, such as the preparation of the different body parts, the chants and the act of “riding” the goat towards the altar. This last equivalence between the sacrificial victim and the novice seeking a higher social and personal status compels us to contradict Evans-Pritchard’s statement in which the idea of substitution is less evident in “confirmatory” sacrifices than in “piacular”

sacrifices. Conversely, in Candomblé the mock death of the initiation (and the subsequent deaths of sacrificial animals) is associated with the making and nurturing of a new life. The newborn *spiritual double* is then taken care of and fed regularly after a certain amount of time in order for him/her to grow and also to allow the evolution of his/her human counterpart. This process is explained in some chants that highlight the co-substantiality of humans and animals, but also of deities and humans, like the *orin* dedicated to the guineafowl which recites: “he will be born like the guineafowl”. In the words of Voget et al.:

Immolated in the *borí* and in the esoteric sacrificial rites of the seclusion, the guineafowl reappears in the *yawós*. It dies for the *yawó* to live, and then it is born again with him. Or, to be coherent with the ritual enunciation, it dies and it is born again transformed into the sacred son. [...] it would be possible to invert the enunciation by saying that, in the same way, the secluded novice dies to be born again as a guineafowl (1993, 104-105).<sup>96</sup>

Anthropologists such as Rane Willerslev extensively analysed the problem of the value of sacrifices, highlighting the fact that the practice involves multiple and often contradictory values. For this purpose, Willerslev takes into consideration the biblical account of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. In the story, Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son in order to

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<sup>96</sup> “Imolado no *borí* e nos ritos sacrificiais esotéricos da fase de reclusão, a conquém reaparece nos *iaós*. Morre para que o *iaô* viva, e depois renasce com ele. Ou, para sermos fieis ao espírito do enunciado ritual, morre e renasce transformado em filho-de-santo. [...] seria possível inverter o enunciado, dizendo que, da mesma forma, o neófito recluso morre para renascer como galinha-d’angola”.

demonstrate his faith to God. However, the human sacrifice is promptly substituted by a ram, setting the basis for a regime of equivalences. Willerslev's argument revolves around the intentions of Abraham, contraposing the faith-based sacrifice to the functional value of it. Drawing from his own fieldwork data, he argues that the practice of voluntary death among the Chukchi, in which senile members of the community ask to be killed by their sons, represents a "tension between desire and duty" (2013, 148) in which faith and cold calculation meet. In fact, human sacrifice in the Chukchi world represents the perfect sacrifice, as it gives value in the realm of spirits to what is a worthless life in the world of humans.

Interestingly, the value of sacrifice has often been analysed from the point of view of the receiver (God, the spirits, the deities), or of the sacrificer (humans), but rarely from the point of view of sacrificial victims. I would like to attempt such an analysis by taking into consideration a rabbinic interpretation — a *midrash* — of the biblical account already mentioned. According to this version of the story of the binding of Isaac, extensively analysed by Shalom Spiegel in his book *The Last Trial*, Abraham had already wounded Isaac to death when the substitution of the ram happened. Isaac had therefore died, and for this reason he is not mentioned in the following verses of the account. However, speculative interpretations argue that he spent a period of time in heaven to recover from his wounds and had been granted with "the blessing of resurrection" (Spiegel 1967, 131). A similar interpretation engages with the feelings of fear that Isaac felt when realizing that his father was ready to slay him: "his soul took flight", but when the angel stopped Abraham "his soul returned to him", meaning that

Isaac fainted out of fear and then came back to life (ibid. 99). In both interpretations, it is evident that the contact with an imminent death affects the victim in a permanent way. It can be argued that either Isaac was resurrected after being slayed, or that the sole fact of him being tied to the altar was “as if” he had died.

With the help these suggestions, I am arguing that the process of mock death and rebirth that is typical of the initiation process is somehow repeated each time during the novice’s obligations. In fact, the death of the goat, which differentiate the actual “rite of passage” from the simple feeding of the orixá, is ritually performed in such a way to create an equivalence between the human and the animal. When Candombecists admit that “It felt like I was going to be slaughtered myself”, it means that the emotional effect obtained by the ritual “is” the actual death of the novice, suddenly substituted by the animal and resurrected into a new social status. Indeed, if we analyse these sacrificial practices from the angle of personal and social evolution, a part of the novice needs to “die” in order to grant his/her further growth and development. In fact, the metaphor of rebirth (or resurrection) would not be effective if a human life was not implicitly at stake.

## 5. Flowing In and Out of Ritual: economic, social and environmental dynamics of the *despachos*

*Fieldwork Notes:*

15/12/2015 - Diadema (Great ABC, São Paulo)

*Pai Cássio: [...] Umbandists and Candomblecists themselves use nature as a reference for the orixá, so we are not degrading nature with our offerings. This environmentalist discourse that the offerings are against nature is an excuse made by people full of prejudices that want to disguise it as ecologically correct. They are not going to criticise the Vale of the Doce River<sup>97</sup>, which committed the worst ecological disaster in the world, the worst in the world and the worst in Brazil, because they have economic power and nobody wants to argue against the Vale. So, what we do in the offerings cannot be described as an aggression towards nature, because we love the orixás, the orixás are the living force of nature, so the offerings are a way to encounter the orixás in nature, and not a way of polluting the nature that belongs to the orixás.<sup>98</sup>*

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<sup>97</sup> Referring to the ecological disaster caused by a dam failure in the Doce River in November 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/brazil-dam-bursts-toxic-sludge-151122125732943.html> (Last access 11/12/2017)

<sup>98</sup> Pai Cássio: Os próprios umbandistas e candomblecistas têm a natureza como uma referência pro orixá, então não somos nós que vamos degradar a natureza com as nossas oferendas. Esse discurso ecológico de dizer que as oferendas são contra a natureza é uma desculpa das pessoas preconceituosas que querem desfarzar de ecologicamente correto. Eles não vão criticar o Vale do Rio Doce que fez o maior desastre ecológico do mundo, o maior do mundo e o maior do Brasil, porque lá tem poder económico e ninguém quer brigar com a Vale. Então, o que nós fazemos, nas oferendas, não pode ser caracterizados como agressão à natureza, porque nós amamos os orixás, orixás é força viva da natureza, então as oferendas são uma maneira de encontro com os orixás na natureza, e não de sujar a natureza que é dos orixás.



### **5.1 Economic trance-actions: between the imagined and the global market**

As has already been mentioned, the marketplace is a fundamental component of the Afro-religious imaginary. Vogel et. al. define Candomblé, Umbanda and similar religious practices as “religions of consumption” (1993, 8), highlighting the close relationship between devotees, merchants and providers.

By presenting a detailed description of sacrificial rituals and offerings in the previous chapter, I attempted to give a sense of the variety (and number of ingredients, objects and animals that are required in order for the rituals to be performed. The implicit argument behind the employment of large numbers and amounts of leaves, animals, food items and special clothes, is that rituals can be extraordinarily expensive and monetary transactions between the sacred father or mother and the sacred sons and daughters are important aspects of Candomblé social dynamics.

As is the case for ritual performance, different Candomblé communities are organized in different ways in order to sustain the costs of maintenance of the *terreiro* and of its activities. For example, in the Italian Candomblé house, which is formally registered as a cultural association, A.DI.CA. (“Association for the Diffusion of Candomblé”), the members of the community pay a small monthly contribution to cover the costs of electricity and water supplies. This feature is present in most Candomblé houses in Brazil, where members and sympathisers support the *terreiro* with monthly or occasional donations, according to their financial possibilities and their roles in the religion. However, this kind of revenue is not sufficient to cover

the costs of all ritual activities, especially of initiations and obligations, which are normally paid by those undergoing the rites of passage. On these occasions, money represents a form of *axé*, as the financial effort that the devotee puts into funding the ritual activities is considered to be part of the willingness of feeding and taking care of one's own orixá. The costs of the rituals can be divided in two parts: the materials (*materiais* in Portuguese or *materiali* in Italian) — the actual ingredients, animals and food items, but also decorations and clothes for the public celebration; and the so called “hand” (*mão* in Portuguese) of the sacred father or mother, - an amount of money that compensates for the time and effort that the priest or priestess puts into directing the rituals<sup>99</sup>. While the cost of the materials varies according to one's personal orixá, its tastes and needs, the cost of the work of the sacred father or mother varies according to his/her prestige and popularity. For example, the priest or priestess of a small Candomblé house located in a poor neighbourhood in the periphery would charge less money than a famous and traditional one. The *terreiros* that attend the needs of celebrities, famous musicians or artists are likely to exploit the popularity of their sacred sons and daughters and ask more money for the religious services they provide. For example Pai Kabila, who runs a famous Candomblé house in the municipality of Barueri (São Paulo), displays a sort of price list where he outlines the costs of his “hand” for each particular

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<sup>99</sup> As it happens in other religious traditions, many Candomblé authorities dedicate themselves solely to running their own communities and do not have other occupations besides attending the needs of sacred sons and daughters or clients. However, there is debate around the fact of priests and priestess being able to carry out different jobs while also being in charge of a *terreiro*.

ritual. Conversely, Mãe Gilda, in her non-orthodox *terreiro* in the northern periphery of São Paulo, rarely asks for money for her services, although she accepts voluntary donations. While Pai Kabila has many sacred sons and daughters and clients of different nationalities, is active on social media like YouTube and Facebook and he even has a Wikipedia page dedicated to him, Mãe Gilda maintains a low profile and the members of her community are mostly relatives or neighbours. As can be observed, this feature often causes the social composition of *terreiros* to be class (and race) based, reflecting the social dynamics of the wider racial and class divide that characterises Brazilian society. However, it is also true that the ritual expenses are often negotiable according to one's financial possibilities, personal involvement with the religious community and even the dynamics of financial solidarity among sacred brothers and sisters. In fact, it is common for the sacred father or mother to charge a lower price to those members of the community who face financial difficulties, as it is common for those who encounter themselves in better situations to give more generous donations. Moreover, in most Candomblé houses there is no fixed price for the obligations, but the members who are undergoing the rites of passage help to cover the costs through a donation scheme. One of my interlocutors of the Axeloia of Salvador, Bahia, a university professor, financially reasonably well off, recounts how, when she was organising her obligation of seven years within the religion (one of the most expensive rituals), she decided to pay not only for her own obligation, but also for her sacred sister's who was willing to undergo the same ritual, but could not afford to pay for it. This example of solidarity within the community shows how these financial flows, when

inserted in a scheme of ritual exchange, allow a certain degree of flexibility and reciprocity which make them more akin to a Maussian gift than to a Simmelian transaction. As highlighted by Ribeiro dos Santos (2006, 12) the idea of exchange is a fundamental notion in the Candomblé world, in which both followers and clients give their financial support and receive the necessary *axé* to help solve their spiritual or personal problems.

As money is an important element in the Candomblé universe, so is the market as a place where money and commodities circulate. The classic accounts of the Afro-Brazilian market described by Vogel et al. (1993), (which I drew on in the first chapter), represent an imagined and “traditional” situation in which ritual commodities can be found in a chaotic and baroque setting. This modality of an imagined and typical marketplace is represented by the Feira de São Joaquim in Salvador, Bahia, a dark and intricate labyrinth of alleys where vendors sell all sort of fruit, grains, baskets, pots, but also ritual images, leaves and special ingredients, and where large numbers of items are displayed on the stalls, hanging from the roof or piled on tables and shelves. At the entrance to the covered market, a large statue of the orixá Exu (protector of money, transactions and communication) welcomes the customers, who normally throw a couple of coins at his feet as an extemporary offering as they walk in. The presence of this image is a further proof of the ties that this particular modality of marketplace intertwines with the Candomblé imaginary.

However, this romanticised version of the Afro-Brazilian market dissolves and becomes fragmented when displaced from the Bahian environment. The Mercado de Madureira in Rio de Janeiro, for instance, retains the great

variety of ingredients that can be acquired in the marketplace described by Vogel et al., but it is organised very differently. It is located in a shopping centre in the northern part of the city, and it has small shops distributed on two floors. While the ground floor is dedicated to the sale of general household items, the second floor, which can be accessed through an escalator, offers almost only special items and ingredients for Afro-Brazilian religions. The majority of these shops sell clothes, other garments, bead necklaces, images, sets of plates and containers for the *assentamentos* and similar items. Another part of the market is solely dedicated to the sale of fresh leaves, while in other stalls live animals that can be acquired for sacrifices. As it can be observed, the Mercadão of Madureira in Rio de Janeiro responds to the needs of a specialist market without being isolated from other local businesses targeted for a more general public and completely integrated into the wider social fabric of the city. It is arranged within the built space of a shopping centre, while other shops of the most diverse kind are also present on the street level in the same area.

Conversely, the area of São Paulo does not offer similar examples of big marketplaces for acquiring specialist items for Candomblé or Umbanda. Rather, those articles can be bought in small shops located in the streets of the metropole and in different neighbourhoods. These shops are normally called *lojas de artigos religiosos* (literally “religious items store”) or *casa de umbanda*, as they are often attended by Umbandists, and mostly run by people who are familiar with Afro-Brazilian religions. Reginaldo Prandi, in his important work on the Candomblé of São Paulo, observes that the

majority of these shops are located in the city centre, close to the municipal market. However, he argues that:

In São Paulo, there are three things that the observer will always notice in every neighbourhood of the periphery: a Pentecostal church, a *casa de umbanda* and a gym [...] (1991, 201).

Pai Cássio is an Umbanda sacred father who lives in Diadema, a city of the ABC Paulista (Greater São Paulo) region, where he runs a temple. Moreover, he is also the owner of a small chain of stores called Casa de Umbanda Zezinho Bahiano where he sells specialist articles for Afro-Brazilian religions. Of his five shops, three are located in different areas of the capital city of São Paulo, one in the nearby municipality of Mogi das Cruzes and the other one in Diadema, where he spends most of his time. Pai Cássio recounts how, motivated by the need of finding the ingredients and items to worship his own entities, he started this business.

Pai Cássio: [...] it began when I entered the religion, I was 11 years old and in Umbanda, the entities that use candles, cigars, feathers, when I was 11 I did not work, so the idea came to me to start selling these items that were used in the religion, and with the money I used to get, I used to buy the things for my own entities, and it was my own necessity when I was a child to have an economic activity in order to acquire the things for my own entities, so from there it naturally came the idea of opening the shop, so the shop was the consequence of my participation in the religion. I joined the religion and because of the necessity of having candles, cigars for my entities, I started to commercialise what everybody used, and I used the profit to buy feathers, to buy the things for the entities. So I joined the religion

when I was 11 years old, and when I was 14 I opened the shop (laughing).

Giovanna: Interesting! So, how did you get the items?

P.C.: Look, at the time I asked to some people who already had shops, I researched, and I kept going. It is something that just happened. I started researching [...] addresses, a provider suggested another, I started cultivating friendship, sympathy, because they thought it was interesting, I was little, doing that, people used to encourage me “look, that guy sells that item, go there, I am giving you a reference, he is going to attend”. I called and: “Oh, it’s the kid, you can sell to him, he is going to pay” (laughing). And I continued. There are providers who have been working with me for thirty years!<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Pai Cássio:... começou que eu entrei na religião com 11 anos, e a umbanda, as entidades que usam velas, charutos, penacho, com 11 anos eu não trabalhava, então surgiu a idéia de fazer comércio dessas mercadorias que já eram utilizadas na religião, e com o dinheiro arrecatado, eu comprava as coisas pras minha próprias entidades, e foi uma necessidade minha quando criança de ter uma atividade econômica que justificasse a aquisição das coisas para minhas próprias entidades, então a partir daí surgiu naturalmente a idéia de ter a loja, então a loja foi uma consequência da minha participação dentro da religião. Eu entrei na religião e diante da necessidade de ter vela, charuto para as minhas entidades, eu comecei a comercializar o que todos usavam, e o lucro reservar para comprar penacho, comprar cosas para as entidades. Então eu fui com once anos, com cartoze anos abri a loja. (risadas). Fui emancipado.

G: Que interessante! E como o senhor conseguia as mercadoria?

P.C.: Olha, na época eu perguntei para algumas pessoas que tinham lojas, pesquisei, e fui atrás. É uma coisa que foi acontecendo. Fui pesquisando [...] endereços, aí um fornecedor indicava o outro, e foi granjeando amizade, simpatia, porque eles acharam interessante, eu era pequeno, fazer aquilo, muitos me davam força “olha, tem tal fulano que vende isso, vai lá que vou te dar um cartão que ele vai atender”. E eu ligava para eles: “Ah, ele é o menino, não, pode vender que ele paga!” (risadas) E acabei continuando, tem fornecedor que está comigo há trinta anos!



Pai Cássio's shop, Diadema ©Giovanna Capponi

Pai Cássio explains how, as a consequence of being part of a religion which requires many specialist items and ingredients, he became a successful businessman and started selling these articles himself. As it can be observed, such items are produced through industrialised processes and create a whole economic network of providers and distributors. Interestingly, as Pai Cássio admits, this specialist share of the market is composed by Brazilian micro and small entrepreneurs, who often identify as devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions.

Pai Cássio: Ah, like every business... everything is industrialised... there are many things that are artisanal or semi-artisanal, but obviously there is an industrial process in many items, right? Like whichever commerce there are providers that produce an item, it is no difference. The things that are artisanal, like bead necklace making... yes, this is an artisanal process, but candles are produced by



industries, cigars are produced by industries... the majority of the products are produced on a large scale because also there is no... it is a market that has its restrictions, that is targeted for specific religions [...]. So the enterprises, so to speak, of the religious market, are micro-enterprises, the majority are micro-enterprises, small entrepreneurs. [...] Normally they are people who are part of the religion who end up working on it.<sup>101</sup>

Indeed, the participants of most Candomblé and Umbanda houses I attended in São Paulo acquire the ingredients and items they need in these small shops located around the city. Yá Paula whose *terreiro* is located in the urbanised neighbourhood of Jabaquara, affirms that she acquires some of the fresh ingredients, such as leaves and grains, in the Zona Cerealista, an area close to the Municipal Market of São Paulo, where products such as grains, pulses, herbs and spices are sold in bulk cheaply.

However, for Pai Mauro and his *terreiro* overseas, the acquisition of both ingredients for the offerings and religious items is a more difficult and expensive process. In fact, ingredients such as manioc flour, yams and palm oil are rare, expensive and often of poor quality in Italy, and they can be

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<sup>101</sup> Pai Cássio: Ah, como todo comércio... é tudo industrializado... tem muita coisa que é artesanal ou semi-artesanal, mas é lógico que tem um processo industrial em várias mercadorias, né? Como um comércio qualquer que tem fornecedor que fazem uma mercadoria, não é uma coisa diferente. Aquilo que é artesanal, montagem de guia... sim, é um processo artesanal, mas velas é industrial, imagens é industrial, charuto é industrial... a maioria dos produtos são produzidos em alta escala porque também não tem uma... é um comércio que tem suas restrições, que é voltado para religiões específicas [...]. Então as empresas, entre aspas, do ramo religioso, são micro-empresas, a maioria são micro-empresas, pequenos empreendedores. [...] Geralmente é pessoal da própria religião que acabam dedicando.

found only in small off-license shops targeted for African or Asian immigrants. For these reasons, the Candomblé community of Arborio developed creative ways of acquiring, preserving, storing and substituting those items that are almost completely absent in Italy but that can be acquired through the globalised production and distribution chain.

The first type of substitution concerns the fact that Pai Mauro needs to rely on those ingredients that are produced and sold for the African or Asian market and then exported to Europe, as the same ingredients produced in Brazil are not commonly available on the global market. Therefore, in the kitchen of the Italian Candomblé house, there can be found black eyed beans from Nigeria, manioc flour from Togo or Ivory Coast and palm oil from Ghana. Dried shrimps come from Thailand and banana leaves are produced in Vietnam, and sold frozen for the global market. However, other ingredients commonly used for the offerings, such as olive oil, rice or honey, are produced and acquired in Italy. Similarly, herbal baths are prepared with the fresh herbs that can be grown locally. As I have explained previously, different plants are associated with different orixás and employed to make herbal baths or similar ritual preparations. For example, in Brazil it is common to use coffee leaves for the rituals dedicated to Oxalá. However, coffee leaves are almost impossible to grow in the temperate climate of Piedmont, so Pai Mauro started substituting them with rosemary, which is also a plant dedicated to Oxalá, but less common in Brazil. The so called “wild” or “forest” space of the *terreiro* of Arborio contains different plants that can be used for the rituals but that also represent the typical vegetation of an Italian backgarden: rosemary, laurel, peppermint, lavender,



An Italian Candomblé garden, (Ilê Axé Alaketu Aira Arborio, Italy)

©Giovanna Capponi

myrtle, but also vines, peach and mulberry trees. Other plants such as *peregun* (*Dracaena* Sp.) and *boldo* have been imported from Brazil and are kept indoors during the winter season.

In this constant game of association and deferral between symbols, plants and deities, the Italian Candomblé changes the texture, the smells and the tastes of its offerings by creatively using material ingredients that, while still valid for performing the rituals, represent a variation of the traditional rule. This time the “variations on a theme” are endorsed by the need to adapt to a new ecological, social and economic background, relying on what is available on the Italian market and what can be imported from the global distribution of food items following migration flows from the Global South to Europe.

Nowadays, small shops selling religious items for Afro-Brazilian religions are present in countries like Portugal, where there is a higher percentage of

migrants from Brazil and South America, and where several Candomblé and Umbanda houses have been active for a few decades (Saraiva 2013, 170). The lack of a proper market of religious items in Italy required some specific ingredients to be shipped or imported from Brazil by Brazilian and Italian practitioners who travel between the two countries. Interestingly, this process of substitutions, adaptation and occasional importation has been fundamental in the early formation of Afro-Brazilian Candomblé. Voeks reminds us how some plants and ingredients have been imported to Brazil from West Africa by travellers, friends and sympathisers of the *terreiros*. It is the case of the French ethnologist and photographer Pierre Verger, often referred to as “messenger between two worlds”, who, at the request of his Candomblecist interlocutors, travelled to Nigeria and brought back to Brazil some cuttings of *akokô* (*Newbouldia laevis*), an endemic plant of Cameroon, that is now relatively common in Salvador (Voeks 1997, 31-32). As has been explained, anthropologists played and continue to play an important role in the shaping of cultural practices, and during my fieldwork I happened to bring things like clothes and kola nuts from Brazil to Italy to satisfy the requests of my interlocutors. However, in this case the actual “messenger between two worlds” (this time between Brazil and Europe) is Pai Odé, who has been working for more than a decade in the Festival Latino-Americando of Assago, which I already mentioned in a previous chapter. In this unusual setting, Pai Odé attends clients who pay for a divination session with the cowries, but he also sells images, statues, charms, herbs, soaps and other religious items that can be found in the shops of São Paulo, together with other souvenirs and artisanal objects from Brazil. Pai Odé created a hybrid

enterprise between a thematic gift-shop and a religious items store, which fits the evocative context of the Latin Festival but also responds to the needs of the Italian clients and sympathisers. The story of the Candomblé house of Arborio is so intertwined with the sale of magico-religious services that some statues depicting the orixás Yemanjá, Oxum and Yansá that can be found in the *terreiro* were originally made as decorations for Pai Odé's stall. In this setting, Pai Odé's resembles more to the iconic fortune-teller that populated the imaginary of fairs and markets of the XVI century, than to a Candomblé priest. Studies show how the use of tarot cards as a divination tool can be traced back to the French occultists of the XVIII century, nevertheless the character of the fortune-teller was already present in popular culture and was often depicted as a gypsy woman (Farley 2009, 22)<sup>102</sup>. Beside this exotic representation of esoteric practitioners, it is interesting to note how magic-religious practices have been historically present in the European territory. The work of Ernesto De Martino, *Magic: A Theory from the South* (2015) is a detailed ethnographic description of sorcery and exorcism in the region of Lucania, in Southern Italy in 1959, where a mixture of Catholic prayers and ceremonial magic was employed to free infants and people from the evil-eye. Similar practices have been analysed by the work of Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (1980), who took into account magic spells and sorcery in rural

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<sup>102</sup> Famous works written in the XIV century, like the opera *Carmen* by Georges Bizet and the novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* by Victor Hugo present a stereotypical but iconic representation of gypsy women whose skills lay in between magic and trickery. However, the idea of fortune-tellers being present in the streets of Southern European cities can be observed in paintings like *The Fortune-Teller* by Caravaggio, dated 1593-94.



Pai Odé's stall at the Festival Latinoamericano (Assago, Milan) ©Giovanna Capponi

France in the 1970s. Indeed, it is important to note that the esoteric side element in Afro-Brazilian religions has been likely influenced by European magic practices and beliefs. As argued by Voeks:

The influence that magic and sorcery held over white Brazilians can be traced [...] also to the precolonial Portuguese worldview, a vision that accepted the existence of the occult forces without question. Belief in magic was widespread among the Portuguese prior to the Iberian conquest, and manipulating the powers of the spiritual realm was regarded as part and parcel of the everyday world. European witchcraft prior to the fifteenth century was directed toward specific ends— love potions, spells, amulets, and predictions. (1997, 48)

As it emerges from the interviews, many of the Italian initiates, before getting in touch with the *terreiro* of Arborio, have previously shown interest in a variety of magic practices such as mediumship, chiromancy and tarot reading.

So, imagine, at some point I started reading the tarot without knowing anything about it, and whatever I said... it happened! So, I think there are people who [...] can see behind, I believe so, because sometimes I used to go to the fortune-teller myself. (sacred daughter)

[*answering a question about how she knew about Candomblé*] Well, I was already interested in solomonic magic. (sacred daughter)

[*talking about a medium he used to visit*] You enter in his room [...] and he starts talking. He barely looks at you, and he tells to you everything about yourself, everything! [...] He does not miss a thing! (ogã)

Clara Saraiva (2013, 131-132) singles out different reasons for the the popularity of Afro-Brazilian religions in Europe. Firstly, these ritual practices are seen as a continuum of Southern European mysticism and magic-religious practices and beliefs, without necessarily contradicting Catholic cultural heritage. Secondly, Afro-Brazilian cults are “religions of afflictions” that often help devotees overcome life-crisis situations. Lastly, these religions have strong performative and emotional traits which are regarded as particularly appealing and in contrast to the rigour of the Catholic doctrine. While, as a general rule, it is true that Italian clients and initiates, especially according to what has been observed in Pai Mauro’s *terreiro*, often perceive Candomblé as another practice in the market of

magic-religious services, these transcultural encounters are never frictionless, especially when the question of religious identity is at stake.

As I mentioned in the second chapter, Pai Mauro's first approach to Candomblé was also through his professional interests as a fortune-teller. When I asked him about how the Candomblé house is perceived by the population of Arborio and the surrounding villages, he explained brilliantly the role of his profession in giving an acceptable image to the *terreiro*:

Pai Mauro: Since I put the advertisement sign with my face on it [offering magical services on demand] along the road to Vercelli, everybody understood the professional function [of the *terreiro*] so, let's say, there was more openness [...] the two things matched [in their minds], they said "Mauro is a professional and he also does other things that are relevant to his profession", so as bizarre as it can appear [...] here it's better to have a wizard than a *pai de santo*.<sup>103</sup>

Tatiane, Pai Mauro's stepdaughter, embodies the sense of this transnational existence. She was born in São Paulo, in a family of Candomblé practitioners and *pais de santo*. At the age of thirteen, her mother married Pai Mauro and they all moved to Italy. Here she remembers the difficulties they encountered while trying to settle the *terreiro* in the small village of Arborio:

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<sup>103</sup> Pai Mauro: Poi invece, da quando ho messo il cartello con la mia faccia, andando verso Vercelli, tutti hanno capito anche la funzione professionale, e allora, diciamo così, c'è stata un'apertura maggiore [...] hanno abbinato le due cose, hanno detto Mauro fa il professionista e fa anche quello, quindi evidentemente quello che fa c'entra con la sua professione. Quindi, per assurdo che sia... è meglio avere un mago che non un *pai de santo*, qui.



Tatiane: [...] That is why we perform the “festas” during the afternoon... they usually do them at night in Brazil. [...] Yes, initially we did it at night as well, but they [the villagers] called the police because we were too loud. [...] because before this house was abandoned, and they called it the ‘ghost house’. Then we moved here [...] with the white clothes, the percussions, singing in a language they don’t know, they say we perform black magic. So it has been difficult, because every time they asked you... they said “she comes from the ghost house”!<sup>104</sup>

Tatiane’s story reveals the need to confront a hostile social environment, where people show diffidence and fear towards the otherness, rather than curiosity or puzzlement. After more than fifteen years since the foundation of the *terreiro* things have not changed. Arborio’s inhabitants can be found, at times, nonchalantly spying on the Candomblé house from the entrance gate, or derisively shouting “Here come the *whites*!” when someone is seen walking around the village in white clothes.

This aspect demonstrates that Italian outsiders are unable to relate to the *terreiro* as a religious community. In fact, religious issues often trigger

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<sup>104</sup> Tatiane: [...] per questo anche che facciamo... fanno le feste al pomeriggio, che di solito si fanno la sera in Brasile. [...] Sì, e le prime volte le facevamo la sera, e hanno chiamato i carabinieri perché faceva troppo casino... [...] perché prima questa casa era abbandonata, quindi la chiamavano la casa dei fantasmi, poi arriviamo noi [...] Con tutti i vestiti bianchi con... le percussioni, e che cantano in una lingua che loro non conoscono, dicono questi fanno della magia nera... quindi è stato un po’ difficile , sì perché ogni volta che passavi in paese ti chiedevano... ti dicevano quella abita nella casa dei fantasmi.



Arborio ©Giovanna Capponi

identity conflicts. Prandi analyses the political tensions between Pentecostalism and Afro-Brazilian cults, where the latter are accused of being a manifestation of the devil itself (2007, 19). In Prandi's case, the orixás are perceived as enemies, but nevertheless they are recognised as part of the country's cultural landscape. In contrast, Italian popular culture does not support their existence in any way. Italian historical memory, in fact, lacks initiations, African deities or complex food offerings, but it does contain witches, herbalists, inquisitors and exorcisms from evil spirits and negative forces.

In 1990, an Italian writer, Sebastiano Vassalli, published a historical novel, *La Chimera*, that won the Strega Prize, the most prestigious Italian literary award. By meticulously selecting historical records of the Italian Catholic Inquisition of the XVI century (involving frequent trials and cruel executions of so called witches and heretics), Vassalli reconstructs the story

of Antonia, an orphan who was adopted by a couple living in a small village called Zardino (which no longer exists), in the rural area between Novara and Vercelli, exactly the area where the Candomblé house of Arborio is now located. The novel recounts how the girl, due to a series of circumstances and to the envious gossiping of her neighbours, was accused of witchcraft. She was tried by the Inquisition and eventually burned at the stake. In the novel Vassalli also describes the well-considered character of Don Michele, a Catholic priest and wizard who could perform healing rituals with herbs and magic spells (1990, 49). However, the villagers were less tolerant towards Antonia, who was accused of being a witch and of attending sabbaths, “living with no Holy Mass nor Holy Confession as the animals or the savages from the New World do<sup>105</sup>” (1990,193).

As can be noted, the setting of such a complex ritual and religious system into a different social and ecological environment gives rise to different dynamics of adaptation, substitution and exchange of goods, objects, food items and plants that cross the Atlantic Ocean together with the people and their cultural understandings. This process radically changes the aesthetic, material, and social composition of the ritual from one country to another, re-combining different elements into a new hybrid. However, different features do not melt down into a sort of Frankenstein’s monster of modernity, but they are composed and re-composed in what Bernal describes as “kaleidoscopic existences”.

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<sup>105</sup> “vivendo senza la Santa Messa e senza la Santa confessione al modo stesso come vivono gli animali o i selvaggi del Nuovo Mondo”.

The metaphor of the kaleidoscope, which holds disparate fragments (that are incommensurable and cannot be resolved or dissolved even into a hybrid) simultaneously in the same frame of reference and makes out of them a whole or a pattern, seems to speak to the cultural world of the diasporic subject, who must construct meaning and coherence through sheer imaginative agency (Bernal 2005, 668-669).

Bearing in mind this metaphor, it can be argued that the *terreiro* is classified by the inhabitants of Arborio and the surroundings not as a religious temple but as a place for the buying and selling of magic-religious services. With a Derridian action of deferral, the *différance* of the exotic provokes fear and anxiety, but it also generates respect. In fact, Italian clients try to fill the cultural gap between themselves and the otherness by renaming it with the well-known categories of the “magic” and the “supernatural”, that are shown and demonstrated during the public ceremonies and through trance. Indeed, the compelling presence of witches and ecstatic rituals in agrarian cults in Northern Italy has been well documented by authors such as Carlo Ginzburg in his books *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches’ Sabbath* (1992), and *The Night Battles: witchcraft & agrarian cults in the sixteenth & seventeenth centuries* (1992).

Informed by the local imaginary, Italian clients pay for the *jogo de búzios*, buy rituals that might solve their personal problems and therefore they reposition the *terreiro* into their universe of meaning. In this way, the power of the orixás is recognised, and their presence in the diaspora is legitimized, through money and through the trade of magical services.

Compared with other types of objects, plants, food items and ingredients, live animals follow different patterns of acquisition. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, most sacred fathers and mothers closely work with trusted livestock sellers who provide them with the specific animal and bird species needed for the rituals. The particularity of these commercial relationships is that Afro-religious people look for animals with very distinct traits according to the ritual they are going to perform: they specifically ask for male or female animals, they want to make sure that horns or crests are present or not, they ask for animals of specific colours and age. From a ritual perspective, these features are more important than the weight or size of the animal, or of the meat quality. The presence of specific and complex criteria of choice, together with the occasional demand for less common animals, for example, peacocks, hares and ducks were some of the factors that helped developing an entire network of livestock providers that dedicate themselves solely to the sale of animals for ritual purposes. Brazilian scholars such as Candido (2015, 114) researched this topic mapping the presence of livestock sellers in the periphery of the city of São Paulo and in the surrounding municipalities. These providers are not necessarily followers of Afro-Brazilian religions and they are only moved by economic interests. Moreover, those working in the area of São Paulo are often in charge of the distribution of live animals that are raised in different rural areas of the country, especially the North-East and Minas Gerais. As shown by Candido's figures, 90% of live animals in the market are sold to sacred fathers and mothers for ritual purposes, while the remaining 10% are sold for private consumption or amateur hen-keeping (ibid. 122-123).

My own fieldwork suggests similar patterns. First, most sacred fathers and mothers develop a commercial relationship of trust and respect with their livestock sellers. For example, Pai Odé's provider runs a livestock distribution point in the Northern part of the state of São Paulo, he acquires the animals from the state of Bahia and he mostly sell them to Candomblé and Umbanda *terreiros*, despite him belonging to an evangelical church.

Pai Odé: Our relationship is extremely commercial, formal and polite. He is super polite and very professional, he speaks with respect but his own religious choice is another one [...] But yes, he sells only to the *povo de santo*<sup>106</sup>, his business is not open to the public, it is only for the *povo de santo*!<sup>107</sup>

Similarly, Yá Paula maintains a special relationship of trust and affection with his provider, who comes from the Northern part of the city of São Paulo.

Yá Paula: Look, my provider is lovely, he is everything to me, he is my collaborator and friend, he does not belong to the religion but he sells live animals, and he ended up knowing the religion through his job, delivering the animals, because many people do not think only about the ideology, but also about the wallet, and the amount of

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<sup>106</sup> Literally "people of the saint" or "sacred people", a way to indicate Afro-religious communities.

<sup>107</sup> Pai Odé: A relação é extremamente comercial, formal e educada. Ele é super educado, ele é muito profissional, se tiver que falar ele fala com respeito mas a opção religiosa dele é outra. [...] Mas sim, é só para o povo de santo que ele vende, ele não tem negocio aberto ao público, é pro povo de santo!

money is huge, huge. It is a lot of money! Jesus, I said to him, this year you will have to give me a present, with all the money we spent on animals! But our relationship is very... with him, first of all: he sends me animals in good state; second, he does not have prejudices against my religion or myself, so he is able to understand [...] Our mutual trust is such that she [the provider's wife who also works in the business] says: "So, accountant, did you do your calculations [of the amount you have to pay]?" he trusts me for the final bill... the partnership that this house has with the provider is very good [...] Normally, when you see that he delivers the right animals, you keep buying from them...<sup>108</sup>

As can be observed, the mutual trust is not only motivated by the great amount of revenue that livestock sellers are able to secure for each Candomblé house, but also by the building of a shared knowledge about the animals and their valued traits. In fact, livestock sellers end up familiarising themselves with the particular criteria of choice and demands of sacred

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<sup>108</sup> Yá Paula: Olha, o meu fornecedor ele é um amor, ele é tudo para mim, ele é meu parceiro e amigo, ele não é da religião mas ele comercializa animais vivos, e ele acabou conhecendo a religião mesmo entregando, fazendo entrega, porque também a gente não pensa só na ideologia, mas também no bolso, e muito é o valor, muito. É muita grana! Nossa eu falei para ele, esse ano tem que me dar um presente, tudo que a gente já gastou de bicho! Mas a nossa relação ela é muito... com ele, primeiro: ele traz animais em bom estado; segundo, ele não tem preconceito com a minha religião e a minha pessoa, ele consegue entender... tanto falei com a esposa dele por dois anos, "ai Paulinha, preciso te conhecer, eu só falo com você pelo telefone", e aí eu conheci ela, ela falou "ai você é linda, eu imaginava que você fosse jovem!" A nossa confiança é tanta que ele fala, "Ai contadora, você já fez a contabilidade?" ele confia em mim o conto de... a parceria que o axé tem com esse fornecedor é muito boa. [...] Geralmente quando você vem que ele entrega direitinho, você fica...

fathers and mothers in order to improve their commercial relationship. Indeed, livestock sellers are the real experts who can make sure that the animals have the right characteristics for the purpose of each specific ritual. As I already mentioned, Pai Mauro acquires the animals and birds he needs for the sacrifices from Alessandro, a local poultry breeder who occasionally acts as a mediator for the acquisition of other animals. As I explained in the previous chapter, Alessandro's business also heavily relies on the partnership he developed with the sacred father. After many years, despite the fact that he has no personal interest in Candomblé, he says to be able to understand what are the characteristics and the preferable breeds for the rituals, according to Pai Mauro's detailed requests. As with plants and other ingredients, the chicken breeds sacrificed in Italy are different from those sold and used in Brazil. As a Brazilian sacred mother noted, when visiting the Italian *terreiro*, "In here, even the chickens are different!"<sup>109</sup>. This detail further justifies the idea that breed classification has no value in a different cultural context, just as noted by Voeks in his study of the plant classification system in Candomblé (1997, 128), and by Ellen in his work on the conceptions of nature among the Nuaulu people of Eastern Indonesia:

If nature is an inventory of things in this sense, then this must be linked to rules about how these things are to be identified and related: that is *order*; and this order has to find some cultural legitimation (Ellen 1996, 120).

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<sup>109</sup> "Aqui até as galinhas são diferentes!"



For most religious authorities I interviewed, the choice of acquiring animals from the livestock market is more convenient than raising animals in the *terreiro*. This is because Afro-Brazilian practices are increasingly set in an urban environment, with less space available for domestic chicken keeping. It is certainly the case of the Axé Ilé Obá, which is located in a populated area of the city of São Paulo, but also of the House of Oxumaré in Salvador, which used to be surrounded by an extensive forested space that progressively shrunk through the urban redevelopment along the decades.

Babá Egbé: No, my daughter, there is no more space to raise animals, we raise some but Babá does not let kill those that live in the house [...] Look, you take one of his cockrels to do something, Babá... gets angry. If you take a cockrel here you get war. Babá likes animals very much.<sup>110</sup>

Similarly, Pai Odé, despite having the space and the conditions to raise chickens and other animals in his *terreiro* in Juquitiba, decided not to keep his own chickens.

Pai Odé: I thought about it, I tried it out. I tried, I would love to, my dream is to have, one day, the possibility to wake up, go to my chicken coop, feed my chickens... to see my ram becoming bigger, to see my kid-goat growing up, but in order to do so, either I put someone experienced in charge, or I have to get the information about how to raise chickens myself, and be there all the time. [...] I already kept ducks, geese, chickens, doves, guineafowls, everything! Also because

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<sup>110</sup> Baba Egbé: Não minha filha, não tem mais espaço para criar bichos não, a gente cria mas os da casa Babá não deixa matar. [...] Olha, pegar um galo dele para fazer alguma coisa, Babá... com raiva. Um galo aqui se você pegar tem guerra. Babá gosta muito di animais.

when people raise animals we become attached, so it is not every animal that you want to make available for an obligation. So what happened was, I ordered some of the animals to the seller and others I had, some I ordered, but those animals that he brought would come contaminated, and would contaminate everything that I had. Maybe an illness that came... all the others died. So keeping chickens is a very delicate and risky thing, sometimes you think you are going to save but you are spending more.<sup>111</sup>

Both Babá Egbé and Pai Odé take into account similar issues when talking about the possibility of raising the sacrificial animals within the perimeter of the Candomblé house. Firstly, both of them are aware of the technical skills required in order to breed and keep healthy animals. Secondly, they both admit that animal keeping for them has more to do with pet keeping than with breeding animals for commercial purposes or domestic consumption. Indeed, we are talking about people whose habits and mindset resonate more with an urban lifestyle than with the logics of production in a rural setting. This topic has been widely explored by authors who analysed the

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<sup>111</sup> Pai Odé: Já. Já pensei, já tentei. Já tentei sim, eu morro de vontade, meu sonho é um dia ter condições de acordar, ir no meu galinheiro, dar comida para minhas galinhas... ver meu bodinho crescendo, ver meu cabritinho crescendo, mas isso ou eu coloco uma pessoa experta ou eu vou ter que me informar como criar os bichos e ficar lá toda hora. [...] Eu já tive patos, ganços, galinhas, pombo, angola, tudo! Também porque quando a gente cria o animal a gente pega um certo carinho, e não é todo animal que você quer dispor para fazer uma obrigação. Então o que acontecia, eu encomendava pro criador uma parte dos animais, uma parte eu tinha, outra parte encomendava, mas essa parte que ele trazia ela vinha contaminada, e em contato contaminava todo aquele que eu tinha. Tal vez uma doença que um que veio... morria todos os outros. Então criar bicho é uma questão muito delicada e de riesgo, tal vez pensando em economizar você está gastando mais.

dynamics of human-livestock interaction in hobby farms, in which human social actors, who normally come from an urban and suburban environment and are reasonably detached by the production process, often present contradictory emotions regarding animal slaughtering (Wilkie 2002). The blurred line between “pets” and “livestock” gives place to what Holloway (2001, 303) calls “ethical ambiguities”, in which animals as subjects and objectified livestock can overlap in the same animal individuals. Both Babá Egbé and Pai Odé argue in favour of animal sacrifice and meat consumption, yet they both talk about the feelings of fondness and attachment towards the animals they keep or used to keep.

Pai Mauro also tried, at the beginning, to keep chickens in the Candomblé house, but he gave up because of the smell, the sound, and the commitment that keeping live animals required. Moreover, he also mentioned the fact that he lacked the technical skills to maintain the flock healthy. Nowadays, the chicken coop has been reconverted into a garden shed, and Pai Mauro finds it more convenient to order the animals from Alessandro, whose farmhouse is located less than two kilometres away.

The only one of my interlocutors who raises his own animals for the sacrifice is Tata Kajalacy, who lives in a beautiful house in the countryside and owns a small ranch where he keeps animals and makes distilled spirits.

Tata Kajalacy: I raise chickens, pigs, goats and now I started with cows, because I need to make organic cheese to sell.

Giovanna: And do you raise animals also for the *terreiro*?

T. K.: Yes, I use everything for the *terreiro*. It is very difficult nowadays to find a chicken that walked, scratched, that ate insects, grass, you do not find that. There are only chickens that ate animal

feed, raised in captivity, it is not the same effect. I work very much, so with this job I have, you need to use the animals rightly. My pig... it already destroyed the wall completely... but it let its nature emerge, and I take its nature. At the moment of the sacrifice, I transfer it, I do it for the sake of someone's health.<sup>112</sup>

Despite the fact that Tata Kajalacy aims at producing and selling meat and dairy products, being a sacred father and attending the needs of his clients and of his sacred sons and daughters represents his most important



Tata Kajalacy's chickens (Caraguatatuba) ©Giovanna Capponi

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<sup>112</sup> Tata Kajalacy: Crio, galinhas, porcos, cabras e agora comecei com vacas, que preciso fazer queijos, tudo orgânico, porque quero fazer queijo orgânicos para vender.

Giovanna: E o senhor não cria pro terreiro também?

T.K.: Sim, uso tudo no terreiro. É muito difícil você achar hoje em dia uma galinha que andou, que ciscou, que comeu bichinhos, que comeu matinho, você não acha. Tem só galinha que comeu ração, criada em cativeiro, não é o mesmo efeito. Eu trabalho muito, então com esse trabalho que eu tenho, você tem que usar o bicho de acordo. O meu porco... já arreventou meu muro inteirinho... mas ele puso a natureza dele para fora e eu pego até a natureza dele. Na hora da matança eu transfiro, eu faço a saúde para alguém.

occupation. Interestingly, the reason for him raising his own animals is to have full control of the conditions of the animals themselves. He believes that the animals bought from livestock sellers and kept in captivity are not suitable for the rituals, as they have lost their natural strength and wildness. Indeed, the valuable characteristics of an animal not only lie in its blood or its meat as a source of life force, but most importantly in its behaviour and its liveliness as a proof of its distinct “animality”. This particular energy can then be transferred to the humans as a healing strategy or to renew one’s personal energy.

As it was observed, the criteria employed in the market do not only take into consideration the aesthetic features of the animal that must be used, nor its weight or the quality of their meat. Conversely, the most important traits that are valued in sacrificial animals are the fact that animals need to be offered while being healthy, while maintaining contacts with the specific energy they embody and with their “wildness”.

## **5.2 The Dirt and the Sacred: Environmental discourse, social conflicts and innovations**

As I have explained, the offerings are normally placed at the feet of the *assentamentos*, which represent a precise channel of communication with the orixás and the corresponding natural forces. However, offerings can also be placed directly in the natural settings where the orixás reside, such as rivers, forests, oceans, but also stone quarries, crossroads and cemeteries.

In Candomblé houses, *assentamentos* also represent a strategy to cultivate *axé*, to keep it closer to humans and to better manipulate it. For this reason,

Candomblecists normally prepare and deliver the food offerings to the *assentamentos* kept within the walls of the *terreiro*. However, what happens to the food leftovers when the ritual has been finalized and when the offerings have been accepted? Normally, not all the food is consumed within the community because of the discrepancies between human tastes and ritual prescriptions I have already described. Moreover, depending on the climatic conditions and other structural elements of the building, offerings are often found in a state of decay or attacked by insects such as flies or ants, therefore considered inedible for human consumption short after the ritual is complete. The offerings are kept in the house after the *orô* for a time varying from one day up to a week, and then they are cleared out. Indeed, the action of cleaning the *assentamentos* and the rooms where the sacrifices have taken place is a ritually structured action termed *ossé*. The containers of the *assentamentos* are opened and cleaned with water and herbs until the blood stains disappear and all the elements contained are then put back in order. The water used to clean the *assentamentos* is normally poured on the ground or at the foot of a tree. Similarly, the plates on which the food offerings were arranged are cleaned, however the food leftovers are not thrown away. They are wrapped in a piece of white cloth and left somewhere in the natural environment, such as in woods or into a river. In fact, once the food has attained a status of sacrality, it cannot be placed in the landfill together with other types of food waste, but it should be consumed by the orixás in their own natural environment. This process is called *despachar*, literally “to despatch”, and the food offerings or leftover offerings that are placed in nature are called *despachos*. The fact of leaving

the *despachos* outside the perimeters of the Candomblé house is not only related to the feeding of the orixás, but also to the idea of disposing of a very delicate type of waste, which sometimes retain some particular qualities that cannot be maintained in a human environment but need to be removed as they are not useful or they are somehow contaminating the efficacy of the ritual. This feature is connected to what Wilk calls “the purifying power of nature” (2015, 226), the concept according to which, transversally and in a variety of cultural contexts — including Western notions of pollution and purity — the principles of contamination and waste are ruled by “*magic* rather than chemistry”, and the natural environment is often regarded as being able to dilute and absorb what has been discarded.

For example, every initiation is followed by a ritual termed *urupim*, in which all the food offerings and leftovers used for the *ebós*, for the *borí* and for the sacrifices, together with the elements representing the “old” life of the novice like the hair that has been cut and his/her old clothes, are taken away and despatched. Indeed, the removal of these items is necessary for the new life of the novice to begin.

The necessity of leaving the *despachos* in a natural space is one of the reasons why sacred fathers and mothers tend to build their own *terreiro* in a rural or forested area, so as to have ready access to a portion of natural landscape, preferably unfrequented and out of sight. Whenever this is not possible, public grounds — gardens, courtyards and urban water reservoirs — replace those imagined ‘sacred groves’ that, according to authors such as Bastide (2000, 72-73), would re-create a mythical African landscape in the Brazilian territories. Vagner Gonçalves da Silva, echoing the famous

ethnography of Victor Turner, calls this process of substitution “the city of symbols”, and he explores the adaptations that the cult of the orixás undergoes in the metropolitan environment of São Paulo, and the consequential re-signification of the urban space.

Tree-lined squares, gardens, bamboo groves, or even street light poles can also represent, in the city, the necessary “forest” for the worshipping of the deities. (2000, 110)<sup>113</sup>

Interestingly, these suggestions have stimulated contemporary artists such as Valter Nu, who used recycled materials to built several sculptures depicting the Afro-Brazilian deities as if they were to be encountered in an urban environment<sup>114</sup>. In his exhibition, titled *Tecno-Orixás* and presented in various locations of São Paulo like Funarte-SP, the artist represented his personal understanding of the orixás in the urban environment: an Oxumaré, the snake-god of the rainbow, made of recycled colourful cables and wires; a Yemanjá, goddess of the ocean, built with scrap loudspeakers ruling over sound *waves*; and a Yansá, goddess of the wind, whose skirt is made of blades from electric fans. From an anthropological perspective, his artwork represents an interesting reflection on how popular culture responds to social and environmental conflicts. Indeed, the “deities of nature” are imagined and reinterpreted in a new form and ruling over new elements in the urban environment. Moreover, following an environmentalist discourse

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<sup>113</sup> Praças arborizadas, jardins, bambuzais, ou até mesmo postes da rede de iluminação pública podem, também, representar na cidade a “floresta” necessária aos cultos das divindades.

<sup>114</sup> Personal communication, November 2015.





Tecno-Orixás, Valter Nu. Funarte-SP ©Giovanna Capponi

that would describe the deities as “guardians of the ecology” (Barbosa e Silva 2012), they are built with recycled materials. In the following pages I will analyse the ways in which the ritual practice responds and intersects with contemporary ideas of pollution, environment and religious and political identity.

Indeed, as noted by da Silva (ibid.) it is common to encounter a *despacho* delivered under a tree or at a crossroad in a Brazilian metropole. This issue has been regarded problematic for many reasons. First of all, it resulted in an exacerbation of the already present conflict between Afro-religious people and other religious groups. It is necessary to mention the role of Neo-Pentecostal churches and especially of the Universal Church Of the Kingdom of God (*Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* - IURD) in the progressive demonization of Candomblé and Umbanda. Afro-Brazilian religions have been systematically compared with satanic cults or regarded as examples of black magic by famous evangelical leaders like Edir Macedo. In 1988 the pastor and founder of the IURD published a controversial book titled *Orixás, Caboclos and Guides: Gods or Demons?*, which became a best-seller of its genre. Television programmes, for example, *Duel of the Gods* (*Duelo dos Deuses* in Portuguese), on air on the Brazilian network Rede Record, broadcast sensationalistic images in which former Umbandists and Candomblecists are possessed by entities like *caboclos* or *exús* that turn out to be evil, and then they are liberated by the pastors in the name of the Holy Spirit. In one episode, transmitted on the 3rd of April 2013, the self-proclaimed former medium Martha Alves declared that children in Candomblé houses “are shaved when they are little, they are prepared, cropped and painted [alluding to the ritual cutting of the hair of the initiate] so that, when they reach eighteen years old, they can be sacrificed.<sup>115</sup>”.

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<sup>115</sup> “são raspadas desde pequenas, são preparadas, catuladas, pintadas, para quando chegar aos 18 anos serem sacrificadas”

Indeed, sacrificial rituals in particular are regarded as dangerous practices not only by outsiders and followers of Neo-Pentecostal churches, but also by Afro-religious sympathisers who claim that the energy of animal blood is “too heavy”. All these external and internal conflicts and prejudices resulted in various attempts by local politicians to legally prohibit animal sacrifice for religious purposes. In the State of São Paulo these attempts are monitored by Dr Hédio Silva Jr., lawyer and former Secretary of Justice of the State of São Paulo, but also *axogun* (the person in charge of animal sacrifice) initiated into Candomblé and sacred son of Xangô, the orixá of justice. Dr Hédio Silva Jr. is specialised in the legal defence of Afro-Brazilian religions and among his recent legal battles he defended the interests of Candomblé *terreiros* against the Municipal law, 1.960 of the 21st of September 2016, which prohibited religious sacrificial practices in the municipality of Cotia, in the state of São Paulo. The law was declared unconstitutional on the 17th of May 2017. Similarly, Dr Hédio helped win a trial against the already mentioned Rede Record for calumny and hate speech in May 2015<sup>116</sup>. In this climate of legal battles, accusations and verbal attacks, this process of demonization reached a peak when, in September 2017, several *terreiros* in the area of Rio de Janeiro have been raided and vandalized by unknown aggressors<sup>117</sup>.

In light of this complex picture, the presence of the *despachos*, often containing animal remains, and the resignification and reclaim of the urban

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<sup>116</sup> Similar trials have been analysed by other scholars in detail. See Candido, 2015.

<sup>117</sup> For a deeper understanding of the dynamics of this religious conflict in Brazil, see the work of Helina Hartikainen, 2017.

environment by Afro-religious practitioners, represents one of the challenges of religious pluralism in contemporary Brazil. As argued by Montero (2006, 63-64), the process of secularization of the Brazilian state was demarcated by a negotiation of the boundaries between magic and religion. In order to be legitimised in the public space, Afro-Brazilian practices had to comply with the idea of “religion”, as opposed to “sorcery”, “superstition” and “charlatanry”.

In the most recent debates, Afro-religious people started being criticized for polluting the environment with their *despachos*. In fact, the sight of rotting



Demonstration against religious intolerance, São Sebastião. ©Giovanna Capponi

food offerings and animal remains abandoned on the street, in a public garden or on the edges of a body of water generates a sense of uneasiness, danger and dirt. Here, I will analyse how the magical aspects of pollution and contamination previously mentioned blend with ethical and environmental concerns. An interesting example of how these dynamics and





*Barquinho* ("little boat") for Yemanjá. @Giovanna Capponi

conflicts emerge in the public and urban space is represented by the *Festa de Yemanjá* (Celebration for Yemanjá), a public religious event organised by several Afro-religious federations of the state of São Paulo and especially attended by Umbandists. These celebrations are a homage to Yemanjá, the goddess of the ocean, and they take place during December, on the beaches of Praia Grande and Mongaguá, two littoral municipalities located about 80 km from the capital. This celebration is considered an institution in the cultural life of that coastal area, and a monumental statue of the goddess Yemanjá is built on the beach of Praia Grande, attracting tourists and devotees. During these celebrations, Umbandists and Candomblecists occupy the public shores, erect marquees, sing, dance, are possessed by all sort of orixás and entities, and prepare offerings for the goddess. The offerings are composed of large wicker baskets filled and adorned with food offerings, flowers, but traditionally also symbols of vanity and femininity - combs, perfumes, jewellery, lipsticks, bottles of champagne and coins.

These presents are often prepared with gift wrapping, fine ribbons and complemented with written inscriptions and requests in which the devotees ask for blessings, health, fortune and love. The baskets are then carried on the devotees' heads and dropped in the sea. Sometimes, the baskets are replaced with boat shaped polystyrene containers for their lightweight and their ability to float for longer times. This kind of celebration requires organization at an administrative level, and Afro-religious federations pay fees and comply with bureaucratic regulations imposed by the municipality of Praia Grande in order to be able to perform their ritual activity on the public shores. In recent political debates, this event has been criticised for polluting the waters and the beach. Pai Cássio, who is also the president of one of the Afro-religious federations that organises the event, argues that the critiques come mostly from Neo-Pentecostal local politicians, who increased the fees and regulations to be fulfilled by the devotees as a way of boycotting the event and restricting the access to the public space. He also ensures that Umbandists are instructed to clean and take away bottles and other objects that are regarded as polluting.

Pai Cássio: I think that this environmentalist discourse is a prejudice disguised as environmentalism. Those who use this discourse, that the *despachos* are environmentally incorrect, do not want to understand that often the things that are despatched are natural things, things that nature consumes. Fruit, clay dishes... these are things that the nature is able to consume.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Pai Cássio: Eu acho que esse viés ecológico é um preconceito disfarçado de ecologia. Quem usa esse discurso de que é ecológicamente incorreto ter o despacho, não quer perceber que muitas vezes o que é despachado são coisas da natureza, que a natureza consome. Fruta, aliquidá de barro... são coisas que a natureza se encarrega de consumir.

Despite these social and religious conflicts that revolve around the use of public space, environmentalist concerns are often shared by sacred fathers and mothers of Candomblé and Umbanda, who find innovative ways to adapt the ritual practice to the current debate on sustainability. This topic creates internal debates about the ingredients and the materials that can or cannot be used, and what places are acceptable for the *despachos* to be deposited.

Pai Odé: If you see a clay dish at a crossroad with a whole dead chicken in it, this is not from the *povo de santo* [people of Candomblé] [...] It is not a practice of the people of *axé*, our practice is to feed, to serve, it is a food chain... you bring it in the middle of the woods, in the middle of the forest where that animal can be eaten by another animal. Never at a crossroad, in a cemetery, or in a public square.<sup>119</sup>

Yá Paula: Lately, everything has been sustainable, and we are also adapting to it... for example, you offer a cockerel for Exú, you leave it where? At a crossroad. So, I agree that there is some kind of prejudice, so what do we do? We leave it in the forest, for example. Do you understand? And from there it will deteriorate automatically and it will transform... and nobody can say anything! [...] There is an sustainability discourse... and it is true, otherwise we will go against our own objectives and values... it is not the connection with nature,

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<sup>119</sup> Pai Odé: Se você vê numa encruzilhada um alguidar com uma galinha inteira morta não é coisa de povo de santo, é coisa de povo de umbanda... Não é uma prática de povo de axé, a nossa prática é aquela de alimentar, tem que servir, é uma cadeia alimentar... você leva no meio do mato, no meio da floresta onde aquele animal vai servir de alimento para outro animal. Jamais numa encruzilhada, num cemitério, numa praça pública.

people's wellbeing, and then we put a chicken there, and it starts smelling, and I don't know, it does not deteriorate, the garbage collector is afraid of cleaning the place because he thinks it is a *macumba*, so he does not put it in the bin [...]<sup>120</sup>

Pai Cássio: There is an awareness that it is good to put flowers... inscriptions that people adorn with paper... things that do not have an aggressive impact. When we do it on the seashore, the sea returns [the offerings] to the beach, and afterwards you go there and clean, but when people do it in open waters [the offerings] do not come back, so that is the problem. The percentage of *terreiros* that do it in open waters is very small, because... you have to rent a boat... but those who do it in open waters, I have seen a coherent discourse of putting flowers, things that do not attack nature, because they know... this is the preoccupation.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Yá Paula: Ultimamente tudo está sendo sustentável, e a gente também está se adequando... por exemplo você vai ofertando um galo para Exu vai deixar aonde? Na encruzilhada. Então eu concordo que aí tem um tipo de preconceito, então o que a gente faz, a gente deixa na mata por exemplo. Entendeu? que daí é uma coisa que degrada, automaticamente vira... e não tem como ninguém falar nada! [...] Está tendo o pensamento da sustentabilidade... e é verdade, se não a gente vai en contra dos nossos objetivos e os nossos valores... não é a ligação da natureza, o bem estar das pessoas, e aí bom, a gente coloca lá uma galinha, fica fedendo, não sei que, não degrada, a pessoa tem medo de pegar, que acha que é macumba, então não vai por no lixo [...]

<sup>121</sup> Pai Cássio: Existe uma consciência de que é bom pôr flores... pedidos que as pessoas poem mas enfeitam em papel... coisas que não têm aquele impacto de agredir. Quando faz na beira mar, o mar devolve, depois você vai e limpa, mas quando se faz em alto mar não tem devolução, e aí é que é o problema. A quantidade de terreiros que faz em alto mar é mínima, porque... tem que alugar barco... mas isso que fazem em alto mar, eu tenho visto um discurso coerente de colocar flores, coisas que não agredem a natureza, porque sabe que vai ser... essa é preocupação.



Both Pai Odé and Yá Paula disagree with the placing of the *despachos* in public and urban spaces, because this practice generates conflicts and prejudices and does not convey a good image of Candomblé in the current social and political atmosphere. Moreover, according to both religious authorities, food offerings need to be transformed into something else by the natural elements.

During my fieldwork I collected several references justifying that, for most Afro-religious people, the actual ritual terminates when the offering has been placed on the ground. As a consequence, what happens to the *despacho* after it has been offered does not seem to affect the efficacy of the ritual communication between humans and deities. However, sacred fathers and mothers also seem to find it important that biodegradable offerings are transformed, consumed and absorbed by the natural environment. Using a similar argument, Pai Cássio explains that, in the case of dealing with a more particular environment such as the ocean, all the non-biodegradable materials are naturally discarded and return back to the beaches through the movement of the waves. For this reason, he mentions that people who deliver their offerings in open waters need to carefully select only objects and ingredients that do not “attack” nature.

In December 2015 Mãe Stella of Oxossi, the leader of the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, one of the most ancient and respected *terreiros* of Salvador, published an article in the Bahian newspaper *A Tarde*, titled “Presence, yes! Presents, no!” (“Presente, sim! Presentes, não!”) in which she declared that

she would no longer support the tradition of leaving presents for Yemanjá in the ocean.

“I accept the challenge and I declare that from 2016 the ‘Present of Yemanjá’ of the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá will no longer pollute the ocean with presents. My sons and daughters will be instructed to honour Yemanjá with harmonious chants. Those who are aware and brave will understand that rituals can and must be adapted according to the transformations of the planet and of our society.”<sup>122</sup>

At the age of 90 years old, Mãe Stella has always been active in promoting cultural and social change by adapting the religious practice to current times. Indeed, she is famous for her campaign against religious syncretism in the 1980s which radically transformed the aesthetics of Candomblé in the whole country. However, the urge which led Candomblecists to remove Catholic images from the *terreiros* is part of a progressive movement of re-Africanization which condemns Afro-religious people to a perennial search for an African authenticity (Capone 2010, 18). I would like to argue that, by incorporating the environmentalist discourse in their understanding of the *despachos*, contemporary Candomblecists are also trying to renounce those baroque and syncretic traits in favour of a more minimalistic aesthetics, which is reminiscent of the imagined African origins of the ritual practice.

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<sup>122</sup> “Encaro o desafio e digo que a partir de 2016 o ‘Presente de Iyemanjá’ do Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá não mais poluirá o mar com presentes. Meus filhos serão orientados a oferecer Iyemanjá com harmoniosos cânticos. Quem for consciente e corajoso entenderá que os ritos podem e devem ser adaptados às transformações do planeta e da sociedade.” A Tarde online 21/12/2015 <http://atarde.uol.com.br/opiniao/noticias/1734286-presenca-sim-presente-nao> (last access 1/12/2017)

This view is shared also by Babá Egbé and by Pai Mauro, who argue in favour of the use of leaves such as castor bean leaves and banana leaves to replace clay dishes and ceramic plates as containers for the food offerings.

Babá Egbé: There is no clay dish in the street, there is nothing like that, also because clay pots were precious things, clay dishes were used to eat. The black man did not have money to leave [dishes with] food in the street, he used castor bean leaves, or banana leaves. There are no bottles or anything like that, there are no presents for Oxossi and all that trinket they put [...]. It all stays here, you can bring [presents] for Yemanjá, for Oxum, everything stays in here, we give them to the sacred daughters to wear.<sup>123</sup>

Pai Mauro: Now we do not use clay dishes to leave around anymore.

The *despacho* is currently done using leaves, back to the origins.<sup>124</sup>

Candomblecists in Italy also face problems when they need to deposit the *despachos* in the natural environment. However these problems do not emerge as a consequence of political and religious conflicts, nor are they related to the use and access to the public space. When Pai Mauro started practicing Candomblé in Italy in the late 1990s, his *terreiro* was located in

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<sup>123</sup> Babá Egbé: Não tem nada de alguidar na rua, não tem nada de até porque o alguidar era coisa fina, era para comer, é prato de comida o alguidar de barro. O negro não tinha dinheiro para botar comida na rua, vai na folha, mamona ou folha de banana. Não tem garrafinha nem nada, não tem presente de Oxossi e essa bijoteria que vai [...] Tudo fica, pode trazer para Yemanjá, para Oxum, fica tudo na casa, que já dá para enfeitar filhas de santo.

<sup>124</sup> Pai Mauro: Adesso non si usano più i piatti di terracotta da lasciare in giro. La cosa del *despacho* adesso si fa, tornando alle origini, usando le foglie.

the city centre of Milan, and he used to leave the *despachos* in the green areas and public parks located in the immediate periphery of the city. However, he recounts how once one of his *despachos* was found by a journalist who wrote an article in the local newspaper, warning the residents about the presence of mysterious sects in the area. This episode was one of the reasons that convinced Pai Mauro to move from the area of Milan and locate his *terreiro* in the rural area of Arborio, where the population density is lower and where *despachos* can be left in the woods and in streams without causing concerns for the local inhabitants.

A similar incident occurred in July 2017 when offerings (placed by people who are not related to my interlocutors) were found on the streets of Paderno Dugnano, a municipality in the Northern region of the Metropolitan City of Milan. The news was covered by the local newspapers *Il Notiziario* and *Il Giorno*. The latter titled: “Paderno: the mystery of the altar with the slaughtered chickens”<sup>125</sup>. According to the article, the offerings consisted of two clay dishes containing two sacrificed chickens, which had been eviscerated and filled with candles, coins, cigars and beans, laid on two pieces of cloth — one red and one black — and complemented with champagne, a Brazilian liquor, fruit and flowers. The article, which presumed that the offerings were part of a religious or magic ritual, also mentioned that local inhabitants were horrified by the scene and that the police were already investigating the case. As it can be observed, the unusual discovery of a *despacho* raised concerns not for the potential

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<sup>125</sup> <http://www.ilgiorno.it/sesto/cronaca/paderno-galline-uccise-1.3268910> (Last access 2/12/2017)

damage it could cause to the environment, but rather for a mixture of reasons connected to public decency and irrational fear. The scene that the articles described as “disturbing” or “macabre” contain elements that resonate with the imaginary of witches, sabbaths and similar elements present in the Italian folkloric tradition, but also with cases of satanist sects, esoteric symbols, animal and human sacrifices that were overexposed by the national and international press in the last two decades. Indeed, that same area in the Northern periphery of Milan (especially the municipalities of Busto Arsizio and Somma Lombarda) has been the location of one of the most infamous criminal cases in Italy’s recent history: a series of murders and crimes perpetrated by a group of self-proclaimed adepts of a satanic sect called the “Beasts of Satan”, between 1998 and 2004 (Offeddu and Sansa 2005). I would like to argue that, once again, the prejudices and perceptions of Afro-Brazilian practices like the *despachos*, in the Italian territory are informed by local cultural and historical factors and are readily associated with esotericism, black magic and even crime.

Indeed, also in the history of Brazil, Afro-Brazilian practices have been regarded as forms of sorcery and suffered prosecution and discrimination. However, as noted by Laura de Mello e Souza (2011), the collective memory and the dominant colonial discourse that associated practices of African origin with black magic and evil forces were informed by an European popular imaginary.

Why did history not coincide with memory? Why were the witches that existed in the Brazilian imagination European, if historical evidence documented a different kind of sorcery, one that was

predominantly African? Was popular memory entirely swidewiped by the ideology of colonization, with Brazil having become, in its dreams and fantasies, a larger Portugal? (ibid., 50).

For this reason, in the Italian case study, where Candomblé is not officially recognised as a religion and where the majority of the population even ignore its existence, the *despachos* are re-signified as threatening and dangerous objects, belonging to an indigenous European cultural and historical background of sorcery, witches and satanic rituals.

Conversely, in contemporary Brazil, after the long quest for the religious and moral legitimization of Candomblé in the public sphere, the social and cultural conflict shifted to environmentalism as an ethical and religious cause.

Interestingly, when Pai Mauro was asked to comment about the *despacho* found in Paderno Dugnano, he argued that that particular offering did not comply with his understanding of how Candomblé offerings should be. Among the discordant elements that he detected by looking at the pictures in the newspaper, he singled out the fact that the presence of non-biodegradable objects is in contrast with the flourishing of *axé*; the concrete pavement on which the offerings were placed was not natural, while everything in his view “needs to go back to nature” and the offerings placed in the natural environment need to be bundled in a piece of cloth, because “a good present always needs to be wrapped”.

Garvey argues that the rising concerns for climate change urged the emergence of a new type of ethical framework, in which moral obligations were extended not only to other human beings but also to non-human animals, elements of the natural environment and whole ecosystems like the oceans or the rainforests with whom humans were interacting (2008, 52-53). The field, that has been named “Environmental Ethics”, started to be debated between the 1960s and the 1970s, and has been defined in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy<sup>126</sup> as “the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non-human contents”. This new framework and thought process, compelled by scientific literature on global warming and conservation concerns, became a general and pervasive topic able to influence politics, economics and international policies on the management of natural resources. As noted by Seabright (2014, 231), dealing with these concerns is not simply a process of careful costs-and-benefits evaluation, but it is rather perceived as a moral imperative. Moreover, the recent debate about the impact of human actions on environmental conservation has been characterised by a dichotomous opposition between the Ecologically Noble Savage, indicating the indigenous forager who displays a deep and romanticised connection with the environment (Hames 2007, 179), and what Balée (1996, 28-29) called the *Homo devastandus*, the Western urbanised citizen whose natural

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<sup>126</sup> Brennan, Andrew and Lo, Yeuk-Sze, "Environmental Ethics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/ethics-environmental/>>.

inclination is to destroy and pollute. The ethics and moralities of environmental discourses were also incorporated into a variety of religious contexts, including monotheistic religions like Christianity, which have been compelled to re-think the role of nature in its theology and in its rituals.

Can communion wine really be the blood of Christ if it contains poisonous pesticide residuals? Is the age-old Buddhist meditation practice of attending to the breath rendered suspect when we are breathing polluted air? (Gottlieb 2006, 19).

Because of the central role of natural elements, both in the description of the orixás' qualities and in the ritual practice, Afro-Brazilian religions easily took over the role of environmentalist activists in the public sphere (Van de Port 2005, 17). As this discourse of self-legitimation entered into the *terreiros*, Afro-religious communities had to re-think the notions of clean, natural and polluting in their own understanding and within the limits of the ritual practice. Moreover, they had to take into account the *magical* and ecological pollution that the presence of their offerings and ritual objects raised in the public space. Interestingly, it can be observed that when Pai Mauro describes the characteristics of an acceptable offering, he indeed makes a moral claim. Not only were the offerings discovered in Paderno Dugnano presenting non-biodegradable objects and were deposited on an unsuitable surface, but they were also "unwrapped". In fact, the idea of wrapping here has a double function: complying with the etiquette of present-giving, but also protecting the offerings from the sight, the prejudices and the accusations of the local inhabitants.



In the following sections, I will present two ethnographic accounts of how the notions of pollution, environmentalism but also access to the public space, management of natural resources and ritual activity intertwine in the life of Afro-religious people in the area of São Paulo.

### **5.3 Innovative landscapes: a visit to the National Sanctuary of Umbanda**

As I explained in the first chapter, experts in botany, ecology and conservation demonstrated how ‘sacred groves’ and ‘virgin forests’ are the result of the multiple interactions between humans and other non-humans animals and plants. In a similar vein, historical ecologists like Crumley and Marquardt (1990) and Balée (1998) argue that natural environments are constructed and managed through human actions in order to become landscapes, which are defined as “culturally and historically determined physical environments” (Balée 1998, 15-16). Indeed, I have showed how, in my case-study, historical needs and cultural perceptions of the environment compelled the social actors to re-think their practices and to find innovative solutions. However, these innovations do not only concern a change in the materials, objects, and procedures of the ritual activity, but also an active modification of landscape as a cultural and historical construct. This is so in the case of the National Sanctuary of Umbanda (*Santuário Nacional de Umbanda*), also known as Ecological Sanctuary of Serra do Mar (*Santuário Ecológico da Serra do Mar*), located in Santo André, in the ABC region of the Greater São Paulo. The Sanctuary is an ecological reserve composed of 645,000 sqm of forested space which used to be part of the Pedreira

Montanhão, a former stone quarry. The area was reclaimed and recovered forty years ago by Pai Rinaldo, an Umbandist sacred father who runs a temple in São Caetano do Sul, another municipality of the ABC region, and also as the president of the Umbandist Federation of the Greater ABC (*Federação Umbandista do Grande ABC*). With the efforts of the whole federation, he managed to transform the former quarry in an ecological reserve, whose aim is to allow Afro-religious people to deposit safely their offerings in the natural landscape without breaking the law, polluting the environment or aggravating socio-political conflicts in the urban areas. The reservation presents all the elements that an Umbandist or a Candomblecist would consider necessary to represent the natural forces of the orixás: rivers, waterfalls, woods and of course, stone quarries. Indeed, the environment has been manipulated and rebuilt to serve these purposes, but it has been also complemented with a large parking lot, a religious items shop and cobbled footpaths leading to different parts of the reserve. Moreover, monumental statues representing the orixás and Umbanda entities have been erected strategically in a sort of square, in the middle of the Sanctuary. The location is constantly surveilled and offerings, candles and other objects are cleared away in the evening after its closure in order to maintain the reserve clean and ready for the following day. While there are similar places in Jquitiba and in the Northern region of the state of São Paulo, this one is particularly famous for being located just 20 or 30 km away from the capital, and it is especially attended by those people who live in the urban areas of São Paulo or the ABC Region and either do not have a *terreiro* to



Santuário Nacional de Umbanda, Santo André. ©Giovanna Capponi

perform the rituals or do not have a private “forested space” that is always associated Candomblé houses.

In this section I will write in the present tense in order to capture how particular events transpired in the the past.

On the 18th of December 2015, Carlos, one of my first interlocutors, informs me that he wants to visit the National Sanctuary of Umbanda the following day, and asks me to come with him and his friend Vanessa. Carlos is a Candomblecist in his early thirties, originally from the North-East of Brazil, who has been living in São Paulo for more than ten years. He had is also recently obtained a PhD in Anthropology and we share similar interests. However, the reason for him to visit the Sanctuary is only partially academic. In fact, he feels that he owns some offerings to two orixás that helped him overcoming a difficult moment in the past. His biological sister, a (daughter of Ogum, the orixá of war and metallurgy) suffered from

dangerous pregnancy complications and almost lost her life. Carlos made a request to the orixás Ogum and Oxum (deity of fertility and motherhood) to save her sister's life and to grant her giving birth to a healthy child. Carlos' sister recently recovered and she found out that her pregnancy is now going well. I agree to accompany him and I tell him that, for that occasion, I will also prepare an offering for my orixá, and I will buy the necessary ingredients. On the same evening, I buy a clay dish, some black-eyed peas and some maize in a *casa de umbanda* shop and I meet Carlos at the train station close to his house, in an outskirt of the Southern region of São Paulo. As we walk to his house, Carlos says that he needs to find some leaves and herbs and he starts spotting ritually useful plants in the rare green patches alongside the main road. On the route to his house, he finds some *aroeira*, a plant dedicated to Yansá, some *peregun* (dracaena) dedicated to Ogum, and some *pitanga* dedicated to Oxossi. This practice of looking for ritual plants in the urban landscape is a common strategy of urbanised Candomblecists, which delineates not only the re-signification of the urban space, but also a enhanced and particular perception of the surrounding environment (da Silva 2000, 107). The "sacred grove" happens to be diluted in the metropole, and Candomblecists are able to re-map the urban landscape through the lens of their ritual knowledge.

Arriving at Carlos' house we start preparing the herbal bath that we will need for the following day. As Carlos and I are tearing the leaves and extracting their juice in a big water container, he says to me: "Do you know that what we are making now is a sacrifice?" Indeed, Carlos is initiated into Candomblé but is also very familiar with the anthropological literature that

indicates the different types of *ejé* — blood, and our offerings this time will not contain animal blood, but only the vegetables. We leave the bath to infuse overnight and we go to sleep. We wake up early in the morning at around 4 a.m., but as we prepare ourselves to take the herbal bath, we realize that we used too much *aroeira*, a plant considered “hot”, and the bath causes itch and irritation on the skin. For this reason, we need to dilute the herbal bath with several litres of water in order to be able to use it. Indeed, dosing the right proportions of “hot” and “cold” leaves is one of those features that indicate an expertise in the ritual practice, which Carlos, as a *yawó*, and I, as an *abián*, do not have. After the herbal bath, we dress in white clothes and start cooking the offerings. Carlos prepares an *omolocum* for Oxum, using black-eyed peas, dried shrimps and palm oil, complemented with boiled eggs. He also decided to prepare an offering for his own orixá, Oxossi, the hunter deity, whose typical dish, called *axoxo*, is made of boiled maize kernels and complemented with coconut slices. We arrange the two preparations in two clay pots and we take some of each to make the offering for my orixá, Logunedé. Being the son of Oxossi and Oxum and retaining the tastes and characteristics of his parents, Logunedé’s favourite dish is simply composed by half *omolocum* and half *axoxo*. After that, Carlos prepares two roasted yams for Ogum, drizzled with palm oil and a small plate of manioc flour for Exu. As it can be observed, offerings are often organized according to a specific hierarchy, and the orixás with special connections with the offerer or with other orixás need to be fed together. In this case, Carlos cannot make an offering to Ogum without making an offering to his own orixá, Oxossi, while Oxum and Logunedé are often fed

together in order to highlight their connection as mother and son. In addition, all rituals need to be preceded by an offering to Exú, the messenger which is in charge of opening the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds. At around 7 a.m. Vanessa knocks at the door. A thirty year old woman from São Paulo, she is an *abián* of Candomblé but she also attended an Umbanda *terreiro* for many years. In fact, she also prepared an offering for her Exú: some manioc flour with a beef steak on top. We put all the offerings in Vanessa's car and we drive to the National Sanctuary of Umbanda.

The Sanctuary is located in an ecological reserve accessible only by a dirt road. The entrance costs five *reais*, (about £1) a price that my interlocutors find reasonable, and gives full access to the area for the whole day. We park in the internal parking lot and we take our offerings, carefully covered with a white cloth, from the boot of the car. This covering is normally done to protect them from the insects but also from the sight of other people, as even that can corrupt the *axé* present in the food. We also stop at the religious items shop to buy some candles. The Sanctuary is currently attended by many people who chant, dance and place offerings in front of statues, in the middle of a clearing or in the woods. Most of them are Umbandists who organise *giras* (sessions) en-plein-air, and some of them are possessed by entities or orixás. Indeed, it is common to encounter all sorts of invisible entities who, attracted by the food offerings, ride their human "horses" and roam around the Sanctuary to smoke cigars, drink, give advice and perform healing practices.

Carlos, Vanessa and I start our visit from a clearing dedicated to Exú, where other people are placing offerings and performing rituals. For health and safety regulations, the Sanctuary does not allow animal sacrifice. However, those animals that are not slaughtered during the rituals can be set free in this space. In fact, not far from us a couple of chickens are scratching and pecking on the ground. These are not the only animals that populate the Sanctuary. Several black vultures, attracted by the food offerings, come to feed. An acrid smell of rotting food pervades the whole area. Carlos and Vanessa choose a spot on the ground to place their offerings for Exú, and complement them with fresh chillies and coins. Vanessa also pours some spirit into a plastic cup and lights a cigar, which she lays on the edge of the clay dish. As Carlos lights a candle and pronounces a short salutation speech for Exú, Vanessa says that she is suddenly feeling a strong energy. Carlos and I shrug and answer that we are not feeling anything, but in that moment



Black vultures. Santuário Nacional de Umbanda, Santo André. ©Giovanna Capponi

Vanessa is possessed by her Exú, who rapidly eats a piece of the steak with some manioc flour, bites a chilli, grabs the cigar and runs off the clearing. Carlos goes after the entity while I stay in the clearing looking after our bags. After a few minutes they come back, Exú drinks from the cup and greets us shaking our left hand and saying *Obrigado* — “Thank you”, with a deep and hoarse voice, then he bends on the ground making circular movements with his arms and leaves Vanessa’s body. She wakes up slightly disorientated, we give her some water to recover and then we leave the clearing.

We continue our visit stopping by another clearing, dedicated to Ogum, where Carlos, moved to tears, places his offering. Carlos claps *paó*, then he thanks Ogum for saving her sister’s life, lights a candle and sings a few chants dedicated to the orixá.

Afterwards, as we still have a few offerings to deposit, we climb uphill following a footpath that leads to a forested area, and we choose a tree under which to place Oxossi’s offering. The usual pattern is repeated: we light candles, clap *paó*, we pronounce a salutation speech and we sing some chants for Oxossi. We keep following the same footpath, which leads us to a small waterfall and a narrow stream. There, some people are placing offerings, walking barefoot on the river rocks and washing their heads under the waterfall. Waterfalls are regarded as having a particularly strong energy, and bathing in a waterfall is considered a way of being physically close to one’s orixás. This is especially true for orixás connected to fresh waters, such as Oxum, Logunedé, but also Yansá and certain qualities of Oxossi.



Carlos chooses a bush on the edge of the river to place his offering for Oxum. The *omolocum* is arranged in a big clay dish inside a wicker basket, which Carlos complements and decorates with yellow ribbons, wooden spoons (symbols of feminine power) and even small plastic dolls representing babies. Once again, Carlos thanks Oxum for granting to his sister a successful pregnancy, and the usual actions (clapping, chanting and salutations) are performed. We all take a small portion of *omolocum* with our hands and eat it. After that, it is my turn to deposit my offering to Logunedé. I choose a nearby spot on the river edge, being careful to place half of the dish into the water. In fact, this orixá is present especially where the river and the forest meet. Once again, the same ritual pattern is repeated as previously described.



Offering for Oxum. Santuário Nacional de Umbanda, Santo André ©Giovanna Capponi

Now that all the offerings have been despatched, Carlos, Vanessa and I join the small crowd around the waterfall. As we stand barefoot waiting to wash our heads, Carlos starts shaking and is possessed by his Oxossi. He emits a tweeting sound and Vanessa and I help him walking on the rocks until he reaches the waterfall and washes his head. Carlos wakes up under the waterfall, completely wet. In turns, Vanessa and I also wash our heads, then we all go back on the same footpath. On our way, we pass in front of another clearing dedicated to Oxalá. We realise that, since he is the father of all the orixás, he should be greeted at the end of certain rituals as a form of respect. We light a candle to Oxalá and we repeat the usual pattern. After that we finish our visit and we go back to the parking lot, we change our clothes, and leave.

This ethnographic account serves to demonstrate how particular Afro-religious people relate to and manage the natural environment. Indeed, the National Sanctuary of Umbanda contingently allows a type of ritual practice that are considered unacceptable in a urban environment, but also in an uncontrolled wilderness. As it can be observed, the *despachos* deposited in the Sanctuary often present elements that are considered polluting or non-natural, such as plastic cups, bottles and ribbons. Similarly, the offerings are often placed in clay dishes, which are being rejected by many Afro-religious authorities. However, in this case the infrastructure itself operates in order to clean and separate, at the end of each day, the elements that are considered environmentally problematic, echoing Mary Douglas' notions of contingent purity. In fact the managers of the Sanctuary ensure that the plastic objects

are thrown away, the food that has not been eaten by animals or insects is cleared, and the earthenware is broken and reused to pave the cobbled footpaths. In this way the Umbandist Federation of the Greater ABC not only included contemporary environmental concerns in their ritual practice, but also developed a particular understanding of how to manage the natural landscape according to the ritual activity itself. Indeed, it is evident here how the modification of the natural landscape reflects the needs and the requirements of the cultural practice.

Moreover, it has been described how this particular and controlled natural environment triggers the presence of the orixás and of other invisible entities through trance possession. On one hand, this feature justifies the symbolic and social aspect of purity and pollution, since the manifestations of the entities en-plein-air and outside the perimeter of the *terreiros* would not be considered acceptable in urban or rural public spaces. On the other



Offering for Logunedé. Santuário Nacional de Umbanda, Santo André. ©Giovanna Capponi

hand, it indicates a certain responsiveness of the natural environment (and the energies associated with it) to the ritual activity. Indeed, the combination and overlapping of the favourite food, the specific natural element and the devotee him/herself seems to provoke a direct reaction from the deities. It is my intention to develop this topic further in the following section.

#### **5.4 When nature responds: the “Offering of the Baskets” of the Axé Ilê Obá**

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned the tradition of placing offerings in the sea as an annual festivity in honour of the orixá Yemanjá. Indeed, some *terreiros* schedule this tradition as part of their ritual calendar, including not only the offerings to Yemanjá, performed in salt waters, but also to other feminine orixás who are normally associated with fresh waters: Oxum, Yansá, Obá, Yewá and Naná. During my fieldwork, I was invited to participate in the “Offering of the Baskets” (*Entrega dos Balaio*s) at the Axé Ilê Obá, a *terreiro* located in the neighbourhood of Jabaquara, in the city of São Paulo. During my interview with Yá Paula a few weeks earlier, she had spoken of this event as a changing tradition, and she had explained how the rituals were adapting to the environmentalist concerns.

Yá Paula: Rightly because things are... adapting, because it is like this, a *fundamento* is a *fundamento* and that's it, it's a dogma, people can update and adapt to the times, we can adapt to the moment, so this... this issue of sustainability... for example, here in the Candomblé house we make the offering of the baskets for the Yabás, [...] which are the feminine deities, there is the basket for Naná, for Yewá, for Obá, for Oxum, for Yansá and for Yemanjá. This year we

are adapting the baskets to be sustainable, so dried flowers, natural flowers, natural cotton fabrics, so that when it goes to the river it will deteriorate, so we can continue with our foundations, the correct ritual, but adapting, using biodegradable materials... this is the idea of being open to the evolution of the world... There are things that cannot be changed. There are things that are foundations, they are millenary foundations and we cannot change them, but there are things that we can modify.<sup>127</sup>

However, the process of re-adapting the ritual to the expectations of the environmentalist discourse often involves a renegotiation of values and practices between different actors — devotees, orixás, but also clients and sympathisers. Here I will highlight how nature is perceived to respond and accept the offerings.

On the 12th of December 2015, I am invited by Yá Paula to participate to the “Offering of the Baskets” of the Axé Ilê Obá, a ritual that is repeated every year in the month of December, in concomitance with the popular

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<sup>127</sup> Yá Paula: Justamente para as coisa estarem... se adequando, porque é assim, o que é fundamento é fundamento e acabou, o que é dogma, a gente pode ir atualizando adequando a época, adequando ao momento, então tem essa... essa questão da sustentabilidade...por exemplo a gente aqui na casa entrega os balaio pras Yabás, [...] que é o orixá femenino, tem o balaio da Nana, da Yewá, da Obá, da Oxum, da Yansã, da Yemanjá. Os balaio esse ano a gente está adequando para ser tudo sustentável, então flores secas, flores naturais, tecidos de algodão feitos naturalmente, também porque quando aquele vai pro rio, vai desfazer, a gente continua o nosso fundamento, o ritual certinho, mas adequando, usando um material biodegradável... isso é a questão de você estar aberto a evolução do mundo... Tem coisas que não tem como mudar. Tem coisas que são fundamentos, são fundamentos milenários e a gente não pode modificar, mas coisas que a gente consegue modificar a gente modifica.



festivity in honour of Yemanjá on the coastal municipalities of the State of São Paulo. I arrive at 8 a.m., and as I enter in the *barracão*, I see a few sacred sons and daughters preparing six large wicker baskets, arranged in circle in the room, each one laid on top of a wooden support, so not to make them touch the ground. The baskets have a diameter of about 80 cm, and they are dressed with colourful fabric, each one with the favourite colours of the respective feminine orixá. Some of the sacred sons and daughters recognise me and I ask if I can help with the preparations. I have been attending this *terreiro* almost every week in the last two months, and I have already met some of the devotees. There are between forty and fifty people present at the Candomblé house in this moment, most of them are young *abiáns* or *yawós* between twenty and thirty years-old, while others are *egbomis* who have been part of the *terreiro* for many years. One of the young *yawós* welcomes me and shows me a plastic tank where I can take



Axé Ilê Obá, São Paulo. ©Giovanna Capponi

some herbal bath, and then she brings me to the changing rooms. I take the herbal bath and get dressed in appropriate white clothes, then I go to the kitchen and I introduce myself to the people present. Some elders encourage me to have breakfast and to serve myself some coffee, so I take a mug and I go to sit on the straw mats with other *yawós* and *abiáns*, with whom I engage in some informal conversation. Indeed, the presence of a *gringa* (non-Brazilian, foreigner, especially said of European or North-American people) like me, dressed in Candomblé clothes and trying to comply with the ritual etiquette, attracts curious questions and friendly smiles. We finally go to the *barracão* where other sacred sons and daughters are preparing the baskets. Each one contains a smaller clay dish with the appropriate food offerings and fruit, but it is also complemented with all sorts of presents, especially objects that represent feminine beauty and vanity: lipsticks, mirrors, make-up, soap bars, shower gel, costume jewellery, etc. These presents have been brought by clients and sympathisers of the *terreiro* and complemented with written or oral requests and dedications, normally called *pedidos* in Portuguese.

Standing around the baskets, sacred daughters and sons meticulously try to strip off and remove the excessive packaging, the plastic covers and the metal stapler clips of the presents. One sacred son comments: “It makes me so sad... we pray so much to nature, and then we drop this stuff there... the less plastic, the better.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> “Me da uma dor... a gente reza tanto pela natureza, e depois joga isso... quanto menos plástico, melhor.”

I am also instructed to help remove as much non-biodegradable material as possible, while other people comment and agree with the sacred son. However, suddenly the atmosphere changes when one sacred daughter reproaches another, as the second one is seen opening a small plastic bag with petals potpourri and completely tearing apart its ribbon. “This has to stay like this”, she says, recomposing the packaging and she adds:

Guys, here we have to understand something... there are things that we will not be able to change... last year we offered some baskets we were super happy about, and then each one, each one of them [the Yabás] complained![...] There are things that we can remove, but then that care that people put in it when they bought [the presents], the request they made when they wrapped them... this is something we can't touch<sup>129</sup>

In this account, the devotee is arguing that the presents cannot be entirely modified, as those objects brought by clients and sympathisers of the *terreiro* are charged with a special energy. Following a Maussian paradigm, the gift always carries the essence and the life of the gifter, it symbolises a bond between the two parts and it implies a promise of reciprocity from the receiver. However, what is at stake here is not the object-symbol, but the energy that has been put in the preparation of the gift. In fact the requests seem to be contained not in the symbolic or effective value of the present,

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<sup>129</sup> Gente, aqui tem que entender uma coisa... tem coisas que a gente não vai conseguir mudar... o ano passado a gente entregou uns balaies com a qual a gente estava super feliz, e depois todas, todas foram reclamar! [...] Tem algumas coisas que a gente pode tirar, mas depois tem o carinho da pessoa que comprou, o pedido que ela fez quando colocou o embalagem... isso a gente não pode mexer.



but in the way it has been manipulated, carefully wrapped, and gracefully decorated. Once again, the actions and intentions employed in the manipulation of material culture are considered an important way to transmit *axé*. For this reason, the sacred daughter warns the other devotees that those packages and wrappings, despite being made of plastic, cannot be undone or removed, because this would compromise the specific messages and requests that have been made during their preparation.

Moreover, here the sacred daughter mentions another interesting detail when she says that the baskets that have been prepared in the previous year have not been accepted by the orixás. Although she does not specify the reason for the Yabás being unhappy about the offerings, she discoses the possibility of a negative or positive response from the orixás themselves during this form of ritual interaction. Indeed, as she says, certain features are *fundamentos* — “foundations” that cannot be changed, as they must be put into effect according to the needs and desires of the orixás.

Back at the *barracão* of the Axé Ilê Obá, we finish decorating the baskets with flowers, under the supervision of the Yá Morô, one of the eldest authorities of the Candomblé house. When they are finally ready, one after the other, some sacred daughters lift and carry the baskets on their heads, helped by other devotees. This task needs to be performed by women. As soon as the offerings are placed on their heads, they go into trance and start dancing in circle and greeting the different directions and entrances of the *barracão*. In the meanwhile, all the people present are kneeling in the position of *okunlé*, as the orixás slowly walk towards the entrance gate and

bring the offerings to the cars parked outside. I overhear one of the sacred daughters commenting to another: “Do you remember what I told you? That when I carried the baskets on my head last year, it was like I had to carry all the requests of the worlds?”<sup>130</sup> Indeed, the weight of the basket is especially an emotional burden and it represents the responsibility of carrying the needs and requests of other people.

Each basket is put into a car boot, the sacred daughters are woken up and, led by Babá Péricles, Yá Paula’s brother, we all get in the cars. The cars belong to some of the devotees of the sacred family who volunteered to drive in this occasion. I am in the car with three *abians* and one *egbomi*. The six cars follow each other and take a highway called *Rodovia dos Imigrantes*, which connects the Southern region of São Paulo with the coast of Praia Grande. After a forty-minute drive, we exit the highway and stop at a clearing on the edge of a road. We are on the border between São Paulo and São Bernardo do Campo, and from the road we can see one of the branches of the Billings Reservoir. The Billings Reservoir (*Represa Billings* in Portuguese) is one of the biggest artificial water reservoirs of the Metropolitan region of São Paulo, named after the U.S. hydroelectric engineer who developed the project between the 1920s and the 1930s. It extends over 127 sqkm and it provides potable water to the municipalities of the Greater ABC region. Despite being located in the middle of an industrial area, the shores of the reservoir present small patches of Atlantic forest

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<sup>130</sup> “Você lembra o que eu te falei? Que quando eu carreguei o balaio o ano passado foi como se tivesse que carregar todos os pedidos do mundo?”

vegetation and in its waters live a few species of fish such as tilapia and carp.

We get out of the cars and, one by one, the sacred daughters lift the baskets onto their heads and are immediately possessed by their respective orixás. The baskets that are going to be deposited in the reservoir are the ones of deities connected to fresh waters: Oxum, Yansá, Obá, Yewá and Naná. These deities represent different aspects and manifestations of the water element, from the waterfall to the swamp. The sacred daughters, in trance, slowly climb down a muddy footpath with the help of other devotees, until reaching the shores of the reservoir. Then they deposit the baskets on the water, they are helped to climb up to the clearing, and they are woken up. Following a known pattern, the offering of the baskets is accompanied by clapping and salutations towards the Yabás. The whole process lasts for more than two hours and I follow it from the top of the footpath together with other devotees. As we are watching the baskets being taken away by the water stream, an *egbomi* draws my attention towards some patches of waterlilies that seem to be circling and pushing the offerings away from the shores, and she comments: “Nature is interesting...”<sup>131</sup> Indeed, the *egbomi* perceives the movements of the water lilies in relation to the position of the offerings on the water as a sign of acceptance of the gifts.

Concluding our duties at the Billings Reservoir, there is one basket left to deliver, which is the one of Yemanjá. We get back in the cars, take the same highway to Praia Grande and we drive along the coast towards the beach of Mongaguá. The sea shore is occupied by the marquees of some Umbandists

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<sup>131</sup> “A natureza é interessante...”

centres, as the popular Festa de Yemanjá is scheduled for that same night. We park the cars on the promenade and we take out the basket for Yemanjá, which is shaped like a small boat and decorated with white, blue and silver ribbons and flowers. The usual pattern of ritual actions and words is repeated. Some sacred daughters and sons walk into the water and push the basket over the waves, while some others stay on the shore and watch the scene from a distance. For many devotees, this moment seems to be emotionally charged, most of them stay quiet and watch the ritual sitting on the sand or touching the water with their feet. As we all gather back on the beach it starts raining and we seek protection under a wooden shelter on the seafront. Suddenly, lightning strikes very close to where we are, and a devotee standing next to me becomes possessed by Yansá, the goddess of rain and storms. I call an elder to take care of her and to wake her up. We wait for other devotees to reach us. We get in the cars and drive back to the Axé Ilê Obá in São Paulo.

In this ethnographic account, it can be observed how, once again, the actions of the natural elements can trigger episodes of trance possession. As already shown in the previous accounts, the co-presence of the offerings, the humans and the natural environment gives rise to a special connection between the devotees and the deities. Indeed, it can be also noted that the success of a ritual is measured by a variety of external signs coming from the different ways in which the orixás manifest.

On several occasions during my fieldwork I have heard Candomblecists commenting on the actions and reactions of natural components as a

response to the ritual activity and especially to the ritual offerings. For example, at Pai Odé's house, while delivering an offering to Oxum in a water pond, devotees enthusiastically commented on the fact that some shrimps had emerged to the surface at the exact moment in which the offerings were touching the waters. Similarly, an Italian *egbomi* recounted how, during an *ebó* for Oxossi performed in the woods surrounding Arborio, a peacock, Oxossi's votive animal, had appeared, and I remember witnessing, together with other sacred sons and daughters, a snail crawling towards the centre of the *barracão* after the rituals dedicated to Oxalá, whose favourite animal is, in fact, the snail. In the same way, an Umbandist at Pai Rinaldo's *terreiro* explained how, while placing some offerings on the beach, the waves completely circled the sand around her in what she understood as a sign of acceptance. Interestingly, these episodes are not described as ordinary forms of interaction, but are always charged with emotions, feelings of surprise and fulfilment.

In this framework, the success of a ritual action coincides with successful communication. It is important to note that this form of communication implies that the requests, prayers and offerings must be properly delivered under a set of ritual rules and knowledge that can adapt to the context and to the contemporary needs. However this "dialogue with nature" also entails an expectation that the orixás — in the form of specific animals, natural agents or possessed humans, will eat, absorb and actively respond to the offerings. This particular way of perceiving and looking at the natural landscape does not only refer to a world of symbolic references and cultural practices; it

incorporates contemporary discourses and scientific understandings of how the environment works. However, it never detracts from the experiential and emotional aspect of ritual and from the sense of enchantment provoked by the responsiveness of the invisible and visible worlds.

## Conclusions

In this thesis, based in large part on ethnographic fieldwork, my aim has been to contribute to anthropological studies of ritual through a focus on ritual offerings and sacrificial practices. In order to do so I presented a complex picture of how Afro-religious social actors relate to a wide range of natural elements, animals and deities. I showed how the *orixás*, with their multiple associations with natural elements, colours, temperaments, food, leaves and materials, can be understood, or interpreted as, as lenses through which to perceive and categorise landscape. Moreover, I tried to re-think sacred objects such as the *assentamentos* as points of encounters between different realms: the animal, the human, the invisible, the inert and the alive. The making and the maintainance of these enchanted objects is achieved through a careful combination of elements which are assembled according to specific rules.

From an emic perspective, the regular feeding of the *orixás* and the energies associated to them is described as being one of the most important purposes of ritual. For this reason, the metaphor of the recipe proved to be particularly useful to understand not only the process of combining the different necessary “ingredients”, but also to explain how the ritual process is subjected to change and innovation. However, the renegotiation of the ritual modalities takes into account multiple agencies, and mediate between the needs of humans, the desires of entities and deities and the will of sacrificial animals. Indeed, it can be observed how, in my case study, sacrificial rituals are always understood as a form of dialogue in which,

through the different stages, all the actors are consulted and are expected to respond and interact through different means, codified signs, and behaviours. The results of this dialogue set the basis for all the modifications and innovations that make the ritual event peculiar in its details. Moreover, I have shown how rituals can be adapted and understood in different social and ecological environments, taking into account fieldwork observations of Candomblé houses set in different contexts in Brazil but also in the particular case study of Northern Italy.

The interaction between humans and *orixás* has been commonly described both by social actors and anthropologists in terms of exchange (*troca* in Portuguese) in which humans give animal and food offerings to receive blessings and favours from the *orixás*.

In this scheme of exchange, interaction and communication, several authors have analysed the value of sacrificial offerings in terms of substitution for a human life, especially when the purpose of the sacrifice is expiatory. Here I drew on the work of Rane Willerslev (2009) who attempted an interpretation of this aspect of sacrificial ritual through an analysis of practices of voluntary death among the Chukchi of the Siberian North. Willerslev explains how self-sacrifice represents the ideal sacrificial practice, in which the human life is taken instead of an animal life.

In my case study, correspondences between human and animal lives are suggested in the mythology, in the chants and in the ritual processes. Indeed, here ritual obligations and rites of passage such as initiation ceremonies contain elements of the mock death of the novice; highlighting the idea of



the ritual being a form of rebirth and change of status. Although this feature is rarely explicit in the words of my interlocutors, it emerges in the emotional aspect and in the sense of risk and danger implicit in the sacrificial killing of an animal. In my interpretation, the interaction between the visible and the invisible world is not fulfilled by the simple exchange of ritual offerings and spiritual favours, rather it is expressed by renewing an idea co-substantiality between humans, deities and animals.

Finally, my contribution concerns the framing of ritual offerings in the natural landscape in the current environmentalist debate. I showed how Afro-religious people creatively adapt and renegotiate the qualities and the properties of the ingredients employed in the offerings through their incorporation of contemporary notions of pollution and environmental ethics into their practices. By doing so, social actors also contribute to the re-signification and to the construction of new natural landscape drawing from culturally determined understandings of what nature is.

Due to the sensitive nature of animal sacrifice, my research practice faced some limitations. Firstly, I chose Afro-religious people as my preferred interlocutors in a context of social and political conflicts. For this reason, I had difficulties in collecting direct observations from other social actors such as the inhabitants of Arborio, members of Neo-Pentecostal churches and people, including animal rights and environmentalist activists, who oppose sacrificial practices for a variety of reasons. My choice of Afro-religious people as the focus of my research also created limitations in terms

of those with who I could speak. For example, my involvement in the Candomblé house of Arborio allowed me to have a deeper understanding of rituals in a specific context and its wider network, it also prevented me to search information in *terreiros* or other contexts which stood in a position of rivalry or competition with my primary interlocutors, both in Europe and in Brazil. Moreover, my thesis could have included a deeper analysis of social and religious conflicts from the perspective of racial conflicts and prejudices. Indeed, the bias against Afro-religious practices in Brazil is strongly influenced by the colonial history of the country. In fact, contemporary scholars presented such examples of “religious intolerance” as new forms of institutional racism (Araújo 2017).

Despite its limitations, I hope that the present work could set the basis for future research projects, exploring in detail some of the topics that here have only been mentioned contingently. For example, I decided not to develop further on the internal conflicts between different Afro-Brazilian ritual traditions and especially between Umbanda and Candomblé in terms of the use of animals in rituals. This topic could lead to a wider research on legal issues related to domestic slaughter and consumption, animal agency and animal sentience. Further, thinking beyond the thesis, the observations on the ways in which cultural and ritual practices adapt to contemporary discourses on conservation and environmentalism could provide a starting point for a deeper understanding of the actual impact of these practices in particular environments, such as the oceans and the coastal landscape. This work could be also seen as a general contribution to the study of human-

environment interaction in specific cultural contexts, especially in the growing field concerning the transnationalization of religious and cultural practices.

## **Appendix**

The research for this project was submitted for ethics consideration under the reference **LSC 14/ 107** in the Department of Life Sciences and was approved under the procedures of the University of Roehampton's Ethics Committee on 16th September 2014.



## **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Research Project:** The role of the chicken in Brazilian candomblé

### **Brief Description of Research Project, and What Participation Involves:**

The chicken plays an important role in candomblé religion on different levels. My project will investigate its relevance in candomblé mythology, in sacrificial rituals and in contemporary discourse of political and religious discrimination. The research aims at shedding light on the interaction between human and non-human animals coexisting in communal ecologies.

I will carry out my research through participant observation, taking part in the rituals and gathering opinions from my informants. The research will be multisituated, and will take into account candomblé houses in Arborio (VC), Italy, and in São Paulo, Brazil. I expect to recruit between five and ten participants in every *terreiro* for interviews, which may last between 30 and 90 minutes according to the participants' availability. You will be required and encouraged to carry out their normal activities during the research project. Confidential statements will not be taken into account for my research. You may be interviewed formally or informally, and the interviews may be audio recorded or not. The eventuality and modes of interviewing will be always discussed with you beforehand. Anonymity will be guaranteed, unless clearly stated in the present form (see below).

The results will be presented in national and international publications, conferences and seminars.

### **Investigator Contact Details:**

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**Consent Statement:**

I agree to take part in this research, and am aware that I am free to withdraw at any point without giving a reason, although if I do so I understand that my data might still be used in a collated form. I understand that the information I provide will be treated in confidence by the investigator and that my identity will be protected in the publication of any findings, and that data will be collected and processed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and with the University's Data Protection Policy.

Name .....

Signature .....

Date .....

Comments: Participation is anonymous, unless participants agree for their names to be used. If you want to appear in the research with your full name, or if you agree to appear in video/photographic material related to the research, please indicate it below. Please attach a copy of the video/photographic material to this form (if applicable).....

.....

.....

.....

Please note: if you have a concern about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with the investigator (or if the researcher is a student you can also contact the Director of Studies.) However, if you would like to contact an independent party please contact the Head of Department.

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## MODULO PER IL CONSENSO DEL PARTECIPANTE

**Titolo del Progetto di Ricerca:** Il ruolo dei gallinacei nel candomblé brasiliano

**Breve descrizione del progetto del coinvolgimento dei partecipanti:**

I gallinacei giocano un ruolo fondamentale nel candomblé brasiliano. Il progetto investigherà la rilevanza di questi uccelli nella mitologia, nei sacrifici rituali e nel dibattito contemporaneo di discriminazione politica e religiosa dei culti di matrice africana. La ricerca vuole gettare luce sulla relazione e sull'interazione tra animali umani e non umani che coesistono in ambienti ecologici comuni.

Utilizzerò l'osservazione partecipante come metodo principale della mia ricerca, prendendo parte ai rituali e raccogliendo le opinioni dei miei informatori. La ricerca sarà svolta presso case di candomblé ad Arborio (VC), Italia, e San Paolo, Brasile. Pianifico di ingaggiare tra i cinque e i dieci partecipanti in ogni terreiro, con il fine di coinvolgerli in interviste della durata di 30 fino ad un massimo di 90 minuti, a seconda della disponibilità dei partecipanti stessi. Ti verrà richiesto di continuare a svolgere le tue abituali mansioni durante il progetto. Informazioni confidenziali non verranno prese in considerazione all'interno della ricerca. Potrai essere intervistato formalmente o informalmente, e le modalità e i termini in cui le interviste si svolgeranno saranno discusse previamente (per esempio, la possibilità di effettuare una registrazione audio della conversazione).

Quando non esplicitamente indicato nel presente formulario (vedi sotto), la completa anonimità verrà sempre garantita. I risultati della ricerca verranno presentati in pubblicazioni, conferenze e seminari nazionali e internazionali.

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**Dichiarazione di consenso informato:**

Dichiaro di voler partecipare a questa ricerca e di essere consapevole di poter ritirare il mio consenso in ogni momento senza darne ragione. Sono consapevole del fatto che le informazioni che fornirò saranno trattate con la massima confidenza dalla ricercatrice e che la mia identità sarà protetta nelle pubblicazioni e in ogni altra presentazione dei risultati finali della ricerca, e che i dati verranno raccolti in osservanza del Data Protection Act 1998 e delle regole di protezione dei dati dell'Università di Roehampton.

Nome .....

Firma.....

Data.....

Commenti: La partecipazione è anonima, a meno che non venga dichiarato altrimenti dal partecipante. Indicare se si vuole apparire nella ricerca con le proprie generalità anagrafiche, o se si presta il consenso per la pubblicazione di materiale audiovisivo e/o fotografico rilevante alla ricerca (in tal caso, si prega di allegare al presente formulario una copia del materiale stesso).

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.....  
.....

Nota: per ulteriori informazioni rispetto ad un qualsiasi aspetto della ricerca, si prega di contattare la ricercatrice e/o il Coordinatore di Studi. Tuttavia, se si preferisce ottenere informazioni da parti terze, contattare il Capo di Dipartimento.

**Coordinatore di Studi  
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## **TERMOS DE CONSENTIMENTO DE PARTICIPAÇÃO**

**Título do projeto:** O papel dos galináceos no candomblé brasileiro

**Breve descrição do projeto e do envolvimento dos participantes:**

Os galináceos tem um papel fundamental no candomblé brasileiro. O projeto investigará a importância desse tipo de aves na mitologia, nos sacrifícios rituais e no debate contemporâneo sobre a discriminação política e religiosa dos cultos de matriz africana.

A pesquisa tem o objetivo de esclarecer a relação e a interação entre animais humano e não humanos que coexistem em ambientes ecológicos comuns.

A minha orientação metodológica principal será a observação participante, entendendo tomar parte aos rituais e juntando as opiniões dos informadores.

A pesquisa será realizada em casas de candomblé na Itália (Arborio, VC) e no Brasil (São Paulo). Planejo de envolver entre cinco e dez participantes para entrevistas, as quais vão durar entre 30 e 90 minutos, según a disponibilidade dos participantes mesmos. Você estará solicitado e incentivado a continuar a exercer as suas actividades regulares durante o projeto. Informações confidenciais não serão tidas em contas na pesquisa. Entrevistas formais ou informais serão organizadas com você, e as condições e as modalidades das mesmas serão discutidas com antecipação (por exemplo, a possibilidade de áudio gravar a conversa).

O anonimato será garantido sempre, com a excepção de você declarar diferentemente no presente documento (veja abaixo). Os resultados da pesquisa serão apresentados em publicações e conferências nacionais e internacionais.

**Contatos da pesquisadora:**

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**Declaração de consentimento informado:**

Declaro de querer participar na pesquisa e de estar ciente da possibilidade de retirar o meu consentimento em qualquer momento sem que explicações nenhuma sejam precisas por minha parte. Estou ciente de que as minhas informações pessoais estarão tratadas com a máxima confiança pela pesquisadora e que a minha identidade será protegida nas publicações e nas outras formas de apresentação dos resultados finais da pesquisa, e que os dados estarão recolhidos respeitando o Data Protection Act 1988 e as regras de proteção dos dados da Universidade de Roehampton.

Nome .....

Assinatura .....

Data. ....

Comentários: O anonimato será garantido sempre, com a exceção do participante declarar diferentemente no presente documento. Por favor, indicar se você quer comparecer na pesquisa com a sua identidade anagráfica, ou se você der o seu consentimento pela publicação de material audiovisual e/ou fotográfico. Nesse caso, por favor anexe ao presente documento uma cópia do material mesmo.

.....  
.....

Nota: para mais informações com respeito à qualquer aspecto da pesquisa, entre em contato com a pesquisadora e/ou o Coordenador dos Estudos. Porém, se você prefere obter informações de terceiros, entre em contato com o Chefe de departamento.

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